

SPOKEN WORD AND THE CREATION OF SACRED SPACE THROUGH
RITUAL PERFORMANCE AND IMAGINATIVE THEOLOGIES:
AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

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In Partial Fulfillment

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Doctor of Ministry

by

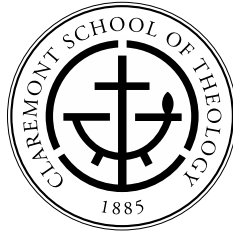
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This professional project completed by

PETER ANDREW EVANS

has been presented to and accepted by
the Faculty of the Claremont School of Theology
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

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ABSTRACT

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By

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This project seeks to demonstrate by autoethnography how spoken word communities express the hybridity of Black folk religious traditions by creating sacred spaces of personal and communal transformation through ritual performance and the enunciation of imaginative theologies. It explores the innovative response to the perception that conventional religious institutions are unwelcoming to diverse thought and inadequate to respond to the unique challenges facing Black communities.

Engaging this need, this paper highlights how the historical vitality of Black folk religious traditions remain evident in spoken word communities, elevates new models of spiritual leadership, and positions spoken word spaces as dynamic sites for theological engagement, religious practice, and communal transformation. In both content and method, the autoethnographic approach presented in this paper allows for the creative dialogue between the researcher's story (through vignettes and poetry), history, and theory in order to provide analysis of their experiences in the Hartford, Connecticut poetry scene and with other spoken word artists.

Acknowledgements

I honor the life of the ancestors who left a spiritual legacy of religious practices that continue to sustain my life. I acknowledge my grandparents, Methuselah and Mary Ford Pumphrey, and am deeply indebted to my parents, Daniel and Alice Evans, and my brothers Daniel Jr., David, Timothy, and Michael, the one who blazed a path for me worthy of emulation.

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I am profoundly appreciative for the Hartford, CT. poetry scene, especially in the early 2000's, my brother and friend, Frederick-Douglass Knowles II (Yesod), my sister-friends Carolyn Austin (Cofi) and Valerie Walker, the Nuyorican Poets Café, Keyona Saquile Lazenby, and Sunni Patterson, whose dynamic spiritual leadership, as demonstrated through her poetic performances, served as a catalyst for this project.

To my daughter, Niara, I am thankful for your creativity and patience. Not only am I in awe of your growth, but you motivate me to be my best self and to embody the meaning of your name; purpose. I am your biggest fan.

And lastly, and most importantly, I am grateful to Kawami, my partner, best friend, and wife. Without you, I would have never completed this process. Your love carried me through the valley-times whether it was expressed as a timely prayer, a sustaining embrace, or literally hours of thought wrangling, editorial revisions and footnote formatting. You are a beautiful reflection of the Divine, and your belief in makes me know that all things are possible. Let's continue to move mountains...

If, in any way, this project contributes to the creation of a more just and joy-filled world, then I am not only humbled, but deeply grateful to God who gives me strength, my ancestors who give me wisdom, and the multiple communities that provide me support and inspiration. In the end, all credit is due to God who upholds me in infinite grace. I only pray that I may always be a faithful steward of this incredible gift of life.

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For those who have pondered colors, especially those who lingered with blue.
For those compelled to create redemption psalms; those willing vessels to whom “The Clearing”
has never stopped its Call.

“You can’t quit the *Word*. Its given to you to speak!”¹

-to Baby Suggs, holy

¹ Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987), 177.

Chapter 1:

Epiphany!

“‘Let the children come!’...It started that way: laughing children, dancing men, crying women and then it got mixed up. Women stopped crying and danced; men sat down and cried; children danced, women laughed, children cried until, exhausted and riven, all and each lay about the Clearing damp and gasping for breath. In the silence that followed, Baby Suggs, holy, offered up to them her great big heart.”²

“Sunni is Baby Suggs!” These words slipped from my mouth before I was even aware that I spoke them. Something profound washed over me as I watched the Poet, Sunni Patterson, perform on a YouTube video and instantly connected it to “The Clearing” scene in the movie *Beloved*.³ I retrieved the classic work that Toni Morrison wrote from my bookcase, and reread the above passage. I realized that this powerful evocation of a Black folk religious practice in “The Clearing” illustrates the ways that spoken word can be used to create spaces of liberation and wholeness. These “alternative” spaces are transformative and allow marginalized peoples to experience the sacred far beyond the bounds of the institutional church.

Standing perched on a rock in the middle of a forest clearing with a cane in hand, Baby Suggs, an elderly Black woman with no formal religious training, exhorts her followers to laugh, dance, and weep “for the living and the dead.”⁴ She then “offers her big heart,” urging those in the forest clearing to love their black flesh – hands, feet, and bodies – as an act of communal affirmation and resistance against a society, which as she says, “does not love black people.”⁵

² Morrison, *Beloved*, 87-88.

³ See Fig A.1 in Appendix A for picture and links to “The Clearing” scene and *We know This Place* by Sunni Patterson.

⁴ Morrison, *Beloved*, 88.

⁵ Morrison, *Beloved*, 88.

Baby Sugg's sermon, set within Morrison's vivid reconstruction of the Ring Shout ritual in "The Clearing", and Sunni Patterson's YouTube video, initiated me, as a spoken word artist, to reflect critically on the similarities between Black folk religious traditions and the practices in spoken word communities.

Both are kinds of cultural expressions that enable and function as sites of resistance, affirmation, and freedom.⁶ In my imagination, I see spoken word artists much like Baby Suggs in her clearing, perched on the metaphorical 'rocks' of poetry stages, holding their microphones like staffs, and, even in seemingly secular locations, using their lyrical performances to create sacred opportunities for communal uplifting. Like Black folk religion, Spoken Word creates liberative spaces where Black identity is interrogated and liberation realized in the multi-voiced articulations of struggles and triumphs, the catharsis of pain, the moments of inspiration as well as in the amens, finger-snaps and handclaps. In these spaces, spoken word artists are more than poets; they become modern day healers, prophets, and preachers.

Like Baby Suggs in "The Clearing", New Orleans born, Sunni Patterson, mounts unconventional pulpits/platforms and offers her "big heart" in the form of her sermons/poems. Her words encode a deeply spiritual message that affirms her spiritual leadership. Though Sunni borrows from multiple religious traditions, she is not limited by any of them. With a verbal deftness that reflects her spiritual dexterity, she channels Spirit in ways that uniquely resonates

⁶ I offer a more comprehensive definition of black folk religion in the following chapter, but generally speaking I mean the religious beliefs and practices of African slaves and their descendants prior to, during, and immediately following the U.S Civil War. Generally, Spoken Word refers to the oral performance of poetry in front of an audience, especially as it developed in the competitive or Slam Poetry culture in the mid 1990s.

with the souls of her listeners. The performance of her poems forms a protective environment of healing and hope; creating modern-day hush harbors. As she poetically ministers, she easily embodies the spirit of Baby Suggs and the Black folk religious traditions that inspired Morrison's literary imagination.

Below is the excerpt from Sunni's poem, *We Know this Place*. It was delivered in a park in downtown New Orleans less than a year after the tragedy of Hurricane Katrina in the summer of 2005. This was the poem that I first saw her perform on my computer screen; the poem that instigated my moment of epiphany. Sunni's "congregation" was a group of those who just recently began returning to their city after experiencing life as refugees. Emphatically, she gives voice to their collective sense of despair:

...and we know this place, all too well,
dank with the smell of death and doom.
It hovers, it smothers, no growth, no room,
no pretty, no please, just gray, just gloom,
just borned me a hope, and it died too soon,

Later, Sunni cries out, articulating the lamentations and prayers of those in the newly *churchified* space.

Where is the love?
Where is that Balm in Gilead
that can heal the wounded soul
or make the half-man whole?

As Sunni finishes the poem, the park is transformed into a modern day "Clearing." In the same manner that Baby Suggs called for the community to come forward by saying, "Let the children come!", Sunni finishes her sermon/poem by saying:

But come, come, children, rally around
And maybe together we can make a sound
That will shake the trees or rattle the ground,
Make strong our knees,

We's freedom bound

And we know this place,
Reclaim the crown,
Hold onto the prize,
Never put it down.
Be firm in the stance,
No break, no bow,
Got to forward on, Mama,
Make your move now,
Forward on Baba,
Make your move now,
Forward, dear children,
'cuz freedom is now.⁷

I write this project out of a deep sense of gratitude. Spoken Word not only offered me an epiphany that served as the catalyst to this present academic work, it also created a community of practice and care that connected me to the waters of resilience that spring from the deep wellsprings of Black folk religious resources. Simply, at a time when I needed it the most, Spoken Word showed up. Not only that, Spoken Word ended up saving my life.

"Forward on..."

⁷ Sunni Patterson, *We Know This Place*, accessed January 11, 2020, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/317269>. Printed with Permission of the Author.

A Testimony: To Auntie

(pt.1)⁸

Dear Auntie,

I remember, seeing you sitting in the pews
with a smile and serene face

I remember the place,

I remember seeing your hat, and hearing
your voice, raising-from your body-now
raised

Eyes closed in, praise-hand in the air

I'm there, Testimony time, first giving honor
to God, Jesus—saints dead and living

And then, respect given

To the pastor, perched in this—

Solid oak pulpit on a Sunday night service,
And at first this....

Was nothing out of the ordinary, Cuz since I
was three

Or ever since I was able to even register
recollections in my memory

I can always see.....You

Auntie...Giving your passionate testimonies

With a fan in one hand, and in the other
you stand,

With the Good Book, you know the one
with the busted cover

The one that has seen years
of celebration and tears

Encased in its worn leather

And whether-or not you knew,
I was right there with you in that pew

Even as time grew and I moved from the
church in order to seek...my own place of
spiritual authenticity

Or to do what you told me...which was to
know God for me,

So please let me [testify]....

⁸ See Fig A.2 in Appendix A for a picture of poet and a link to the performance of the poem, *A Testimony*, by Mahsea Evans.

My Story

1. Home/Beginnings

My story begins by my Auntie's sturdy side as we sit together on the church pew. I remember how she fanned herself during the testimony time portion of the Sunday night worship service. This was the time to testify, or to offer your word in the presence of community about the God who can "make ways out of no ways." In the poem, Auntie is not an actual person, but a composite character of my ancestors who occupied that space. In many ways she is also an archetype of the elders who stood as legacy holders of the faith heritage that was so formative in my upbringing. Every Sunday, my parents would gather me and my four brothers into our dark brown wood-paneled 80's era station wagon and drive the 15 minutes to church. My father, a church elder and pastor. My mother, the most spiritual person I knew.

Beyond church, my parents ensured that we got good religious training including enrolling my brother and I into a small Christian school for both my elementary and secondary education. There, and even into college, I took on leadership roles; organizing chapels, joining gospel choirs, and leading Bible studies in the dorms. For as long as I can remember, I felt that I had a call on my life to preach as a religious minister; a call that a Pentecostal evangelist prophesied and affirmed in the never-to-be-forgotten 3rd hour into an exhausting 4-hour service.

Twice a year, we would also go "Down-South" to Calvert County, MD; the place where my parents, and parent's parents, lived. This was the soil that grew the foods that sustained my grandparents' bodies. It was also the land that recorded the prints of my ancestors' un-free feet;

land that was once worked by their un-free hands while laboring in hot tobacco fields. Though raised “Up-North” in Connecticut, Maryland was, and remains, my place of deep-home.

In fact, my earliest memories and religious imaginations were formed in a small Methodist church where my whole extended family gathered. This faith of mine, this spirituality, this vocational call within, ran deep in my bones, deep as soul-speak, “deep like rivers”, and deep like the questions that began to visit upon my searching mind as I matured into my early 20’s.

2. Exile/Crisis

As I walked out my pastor’s office, I let down the mask that grinned and lied to hide my frustration to my unanswered inquiries. As I walked away, I was surprised there were no tears. Still, a heavy mixture of disappointment and resolve combined to steel my quickening steps as I walked down the carpeted corridor. I exited through the rear church doors into the crisp Connecticut night. I knew that it was time to leave...

For years, I harbored questions about my faith and received unsatisfactory responses. This last conversation in my pastor’s office was a culmination of many dialogues between family, faith leaders, and available resources. I had questions about the beliefs embedded within my Christian upbringing including its exclusive truth claims, and the presumed infallibility of the Bible despite textual contradictions and contextual subjectivities. Beyond these religious-based criticisms, I had some socially centered questions that needed addressing as well. How should I feel about my LGBTQ friends who went to church but remained closeted out of fear? How should I feel about my Muslim friend who introduced me to the beautiful Islamic prayer practice of salat? How should I view Malcolm X whose life and story were a formative force in my

identity as a Black man? How does my faith speak to the unique perils of being Black in America in the wake of the Rodney King beating in LA, or the 41 bullets fired from police guns; many of which pierced the Black body of Amadou Diallo on his doorstep in the Bronx? In the absence of answers, I was ready to leave...

But what happens to a *faith* deferred? Like a dream, does it dry up like a raisin in the sun? What happens to my call to preach? Like morning mist, does it simply fade away? By the time of this conversation with my pastor, I had already stopped going to church consistently. I was not bitter or even antipathetic towards church; I was just certain that it was no longer meeting my level of spiritual curiosity or offering me what I needed in this season of my life. I also realized that the greatest gift that organized church provided was not found in the exposition of right doctrines, but in the creation of spaces where people could gather and feel supported as a community.

This is what I would grow to grieve the most as I left the church I knew. This is what gave me a feeling of being spiritually homeless. This is what made me feel like my life was slipping into the displacing darkness of a directionless unknown. This is what caused me to feel alone at times, struggling and stripped of the familiar means of seeking divine guidance.

This feeling is also what led me to drive to an East Hartford park on an early Sunday morning to sit by the banks of the Connecticut River.⁹ As I sat, overlooking the Hartford Skyline in the dawn, I begin to remember the song that my Auntie once sung; a song I heard while by her side in the pew. I remembered how to lay down my burdens down by the *River's* side. I hummed that old song as I cast my prayers to the waters. It was then that I encountered God in a new way

⁹ See Fig B.1 in Appendix A for picture.

and found a sense of assurance in *Her* shimmering face. Somehow, in silence, the *River* spoke to me; alleviating my internal struggle such that I needed to study war no more. Somehow, I knew that God was not only with me, but would guide my next steps. Somehow by *Her* soundless voice, I knew I would be led to my new place of home...

.

A Testimony: To Auntie

Continued (pt.2) ...

.... Even as time grew and I moved from the church in order to seek...my own place of spiritual authenticity

Or to do what you told me...which was to know God for me,

So please let me [testify]

And specify how I still met God but just in different ways

Like those divine glimpses when I joined poetry circles filled with shakeries and djembes

Like those times when I swayed to ancient rhythms

And I danced in movements that pulsed with a soul-wisdom

I partaked in rituals that ran deep like rivers-vibrating from the boom-bat of the drum

Delivered in the melodic voice where chants of invocations of orishas were sung

And it was in the company of Buddhist who taught me

How to meditate on the back porch where their multi-colored prayer flags were strung

And I'll never forget, Tariq who prayed with me in whispered Arabic--- salaam alaykum

And I felt that peace come—

Pouring over me as he awoke me early to experience salat while facing the rising sun

And Auntie

My testimony includes when my sister had me sit in the silence of a grove of old trees

Or when I listened with closed eyes and upheld palms and faced the sea

And in the receiving of those waters I was baptized to see

That the God I seek has been and will always be inside of me

And this is my story and my song—And I truly feel the Spirit all day long

So please let me [testify]...

3. Home/Salvation

Months after my riverside communion, the place where I experienced God for myself, I vacillated between moments of grief over what was lost, and a peculiar expectancy over what was to come. In one of my lonelier moments in April of 1999, I rented an independent movie from Blockbusters Video entitled, *Slam*.¹⁰ From the moment the movie began, I was captivated by the poet, Saul Williams, who was playing the main character Raymond Joshua. This was a story of a young Black man from Washington DC battling the unfairness of the justice system and finding a sense of power and redemption in his ability to write and perform spoken word poetry. I was transfixed throughout the movie. This enrapturing feeling intensified until the final scene when Saul Williams performed his poem, *Sha Clack Clack*.¹¹ I knew my life had just changed.

If I could find the spot where truth echoes
I would stand there and whisper memories of my children's future
I would let their future dwell in my past
So that I might live a brighter now....

I am a negro! Yes negro, negro from _necro_ meaning death
I overcame it so they named me after it
And I be spitting at death from behind
And putting "Kick Me" signs on it's back
Because I am not the son of Sha-Clack-Clack
I am before that, I am before
I am before before

Before death is eternity, after death is eternity
There is no death there's only eternity
And I be riding on the wings of eternity
Like HYAH! HYAH! HYAH!

¹⁰ See Fig B.2 in Appendix B for picture.

¹¹ See Appendix B for a link to the Poem, *Sha Clack Clack*, by Saul Williams.

My heart quickened as I experienced the cadence, content, and charisma of Saul Williams. It felt like a sermon, but it was a poetry, spoken. Energetically it felt familiar, but different. It felt like a light clicked on. I did not know much about spoken word, but I knew what salvation felt like. This was it.

A few weeks later, I looked in the newspaper and saw a listing for a poetry slam¹³ happening at the Hartford Public library. I sheepishly entered the space armed with nothing but a Mead spiral notebook with the one poem I wrote scrawled on the inside. I did not intend to perform, but a beautiful Black woman with a wide smile and gentle eyes encouraged me to “speak my truth.” I walked down to the stage as if the “doors of the church were opened.” I did not even know that it was a competition. Fortunately, I ended getting the highest score in the first round. Unfortunately, I did not know that there was second round, and I had only written one piece. Not to be deterred, I ran up the stairs into the reserve section of the library and finished a poem that I had begun writing the previous night. I returned just as my name was being called to return to the stage. I performed through the barely legible scribbles and, surprisingly, ended up winning the competition that night. By no means was I the best poet, but my early success that

¹² Richard Stratton and Kim Wozencraft, eds., *Slam* (New York, NY: Grove Press, 1998), 260-261.

¹³ “A competitive poetry performance in which selected audience members score performers, and winners are determined by total points. Slam is a composite genre that combines elements of poetry, theater, performance, and storytelling. The genre’s origins can be traced to Chicago in the early 1980s. Since then, groups of volunteers have organized slams in venues across the world. The first National Poetry Slam was held in 1990 and has become an annual event in which teams from cities across the United States compete at events in a host city.” Poetry Foundation, accessed January 9, 2020, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/learn/glossary-terms?query=slam+poetry>.

night served to affirm in me the sense that I was on the right path. I asked if I could have the sheet from the large flipboard that recorded the scores that night. I have kept it ever since as a reminding artifact of answered prayer.¹⁴

I started attending this gathering every Wednesday night at the Hartford Library. Soon, I, along with a group of poets, began to build community around the artistic expressions of our life's concerns that would effortlessly pour out on our pages and pass through our open mouths. Eventually, the vacuum created by leaving the church was filled by the spoken word community that populated the scene in Hartford CT. It was a diverse, eclectic and religiously pluralistic community that somehow accommodated a multiplicity of spiritual beliefs and practices with ease. Despite the differences, my friends became more like family as we created safe spaces to explore our gifts and play. There was nothing more invigorating than to come together and celebrate our creative connection through sharing poetry.

In the summer months, we would gather around this large Oak tree in the middle of Bushnell Park in downtown Hartford.¹⁵ From afar, I could hear the rhythms of drums, voices, and laughter wafting from the newly expanding group. I would hasten my steps while clutching my notebook a little tighter; a spiral notebook quickly filling with new poems. I could not wait to share and to "offer my big heart." Being a part of that spoken word community was more than just having fun, it was participating in a new conduit of spiritual expressions that was previously unknown to me or simply taboo. Writing and performing spoken word in the library, and later around that large Oak tree in Bushnell Park, was both liberating and exhilarating. Like that

¹⁴ See Fig B.3 in Appendix B for picture.

¹⁵ See Fig C.1 in Appendix C for pictures.

moment by the *River*, I encountered a new face of God in this creative space, and behold, it was good.

This new experience of God became the spirituality of my life. Instead of a singular being, God was that “something sacred” that was discerned in our coming together. God was the substance of that inextricable, interconnected, and entangled web that we experienced in our communal spoken word practices, whether they were performed at the library, by the tree, in the intimacy of house gatherings, or in the vibrancy of open mic spots. God was found within our collective gatherings, and our relationships testified to a truth beyond parochial religious claims. This truth was creative, effectual, and transformative for people like me.

In fact, I started going by the name *Mahsea* at this time. It is derived from the Ghanaian Adinkra symbol, Mate Masie.¹⁶ This symbol, which stands for wisdom, prudence, and understanding, is literally translated to mean, “that which I hear, I keep (do)”¹⁷. My name, Mahsea, prophetically called me to be my best self, and to this day it reminds me of the wisdom of not only listening to God’s guidance but activating that divine word by actually heeding it.

By the Fall of that same year, a new open mic poetry spot opened up called the Junxion at Signatures Café.¹⁸ It was a small cramped space that was located right across from Union Station. At times, one could hear the rumble of New Haven bound trains in the middle of poems. It was there that I performed my first feature set that included a dramatic reading of the 28th chapter in the Book of Job; “Where can Wisdom can be found?” I remember stepping up on the small stage, adjusting the mic, surveying the crowd of mostly friendly faces, and saying, as if it

¹⁶ W. Bruce Willis, *The Adinkra Dictionary: Visual Primer on the Language of Adinkra* (Washington: The Pyramid Complex, 2005), 100.

¹⁷ See Fig C.2 in Appendix C for picture.

¹⁸ See Fig C.3-4 in Appendix C for pictures.

was testimony time, “*Spoken word saved my life.*”¹⁹ I remember hearing the “amens!” Mostly, I remember performing from a profound sense of connection to God and somehow feeling that my old call to preach was revived. It did not fade away like mist, nor did my faith dry up like a raisin. In fact, the sunrays of creativity radiated in me as a brilliant new sense of vocational vigor.

The Junxion was a place that accommodated much more than the mere creation of entertainment. It was more than the place where “fire” performance pieces elicited the chorus of oohs and a shower of finger-snaps. No, this was the place where a religious experience was being creatively innovated. The rituals and language, embodied by the performer and audience, became examples of exploring the malleability of religious symbolism.²⁰ The microphone transcended its utilitarian function of amplifying sound to becoming the symbolic presence of the “something sacred” that was surfaced in that space. This understanding was even present in the language. People would say terms like “don’t disrespect the mic” to dissuade poor or profane performances. People would also say that one should “bless the mic” with poetic offerings that was worthy of the sacred space that spoken word created.

The experiences like those found in the Junxion were transformative for both the performer and the audience. These spoken word communities functioned in a way that signified a sacramental act of synergistic collaboration with the Creator. Often, a type of evangelistic enthusiasm fueled the desire to share this creative energy. We spilled out of the café’s and poetry spots and into the public spaces of parks and street corners. Ever alive in me are the memories of

¹⁹ See Fig C.5 in Appendix C for picture.

²⁰ Richard Lindsay, “God, Sex, and Popular Culture: The Evil Demon of Images and the Precession of Lady Gaga,” in *Queer Religion: Homosexuality in Modern Religious History*, eds. David L Boisvert and Jay Emerson Johnson, vol. 1 (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2012), 210-216.

being part of cyphers, or a circle of poets, on Main Street in front of Hartford City Hall. Stereo-surrounded by the cacophony of the city's kinetics, we poetically poured out our hearts in public as if we were alone with God.²¹

In these spoken word communities, I found a new place of home. It was a home that honored my spiritual inquires while allowing me to still feel grounded by my Auntie's side in that church-house pew. It was a home that enabled me to embrace a new community of belonging while cultivating my call to speak a "good word" to the people.

I remember the library. I remember the Junxion. I remember the quieter times like when we gathered around that large oak tree in the middle of Bushnell Park. Sometimes we spoke; sometimes we said nothing. Other times, we simply allowed the rhythms of an impromptu drum circle carry us away like the wind; a whistling testimony of the mysterious moves of Spirit which makes swirling ways out of no ways. I remember the message in Gabriel's breath, and the tranquil feeling of angelic annunciations being blown gently in the sacred breeze...

"Spoken word saved my life"

²¹ See Fig C.6 in Appendix C for picture.

Chapter 2:

Project Summary

Problem

The problem that was surfaced within my story is how conventional religious institutions are often perceived unwelcoming to diverse thought and inadequate to respond to the unique challenges facing Black communities. This phenomenon could be also contextualized within a greater post-modern critique that contributes to an overall suspicion and mistrust of religious institutions. Because of this, there are those in Black communities who feel religiously homeless, despite harboring a deep sense of spirituality.

Secondly, these challenges require new resources of resilience that is not provided in traditional religious settings. This has resulted in the development of new and innovative spaces of sacred encounter including the places where communities gather around spoken word poetry performances. In general, spoken word²² communities refer to those who participate in the experience of an embodied art where poetry is performed in front of an audience. It is rooted in storytelling, the Black Arts Movement, theater, and hip-hop. These performance spaces foster diverse communities of belonging and facilitate opportunities for personal and communal spiritual liberation. Unfortunately, because this happens in spaces that are not conventionally

²² “It is a broad designation for poetry intended for performance. Though some spoken word poetry may also be published on the page, the genre has its roots in oral traditions and performance. Spoken word can encompass or contain elements of rap, hip-hop, storytelling, theater, and jazz, rock, blues, and folk music. Characterized by rhyme, repetition, improvisation, and word play, spoken word poems frequently refer to issues of social justice, politics, race, and community. Related to slam poetry, spoken word may draw on music, sound, dance, or other kinds of performance to connect with audiences.” Poetry Foundation, accessed January 9, 2020, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/learn/glossary-terms?query=spoken+word>.

sanctioned, or recognized for religious activity, this phenomenon has been underacknowledged and misunderstood by both the religious and theological education communities.

Purpose

In response to these problems, this project demonstrates by autoethnography how spoken word communities express the hybridity of Black folk religious traditions by creating sacred spaces through ritual performance and the enunciation of imaginative theologies. This is done for the purpose of personal and communal transformation.

Significance

At a time when diverse communities of belonging and resilience are needed to confront the challenges facing Black communities, this project accomplishes multiple things. First, it highlights how the historical vitality of Black folk religious traditions are evident within spoken word communities. Second, it elevates how spoken word communities demonstrate new models of spiritual leadership at the intersections of ritual performance and imaginative theologizing. Lastly, it contributes scholarly insight to the knowledge of this phenomenon by positioning spoken word as a dynamic site for theological engagement, religious practice, and communal transformation.

Audience

This research will be useful to both professional and lay members of religious institutions. Illuminating the ways people are getting their spiritual needs met in non-church spaces provides a necessary rebuke to traditional religion. Still, when contextualized as a Black folk religious tradition, spoken word communities can be perceived as a partner to the work of

the church, even as it sometimes functions as a haven for those seeking spiritual belonging that is not religiously exclusive. This research explores ways that ministry is happening outside the institutional church. It also provides a window from which both leaders and layperson can learn from the wisdom gleaned in these spaces and understand the formational forces that initiate and shape its context.

This research would also be useful to seminaries and those in the study of Black religion, art, or culture. It surfaces spoken word poetry as a new disruptive theology-in-practice that is responsive to the challenges faced by Black communities. It also contextualizes the work of artists as a form of spiritual leadership that is integral to the communal creation of sacred spaces of divine encounter. Lastly, this work would be of interest to, and is written to be accessible for, anyone with an interest in exploring the development of an underexamined and dynamic spiritual practice as a Black folk religious tradition.

Scope and Limitations

Through autoethnography, this project explores the connections between spoken word communities, Black folk religious traditions, and the creation of sacred spaces of liberation and wholeness. Though I am keenly aware of the social-political dynamics that impact Black communities, it is not the direct focus of this project. Similarly, this project does not elaborate on microphenomena within spoken word communities like Slam Poetry competitions and shows. Though these are rich areas of inquiry, I am more concerned with investigating the Black folk religious practices within spoken word communities through the lens of my first-hand experiences and memory.

Method:

Why autoethnography?

I chose autoethnography for my methodology as a response to the epiphanic moment of connecting Sunni Patterson's performance in New Orleans with Baby Suggs folk-ministry in "The Clearing." Epiphanies are defined as "transformative moments or realizations that significantly shape or alter the (perceived) course of our lives."²³ Not only did it dawn on me that spoken word communities express Black folk religious traditions, but this epiphany became the threshold that enabled me to look back at the "recollections, memories, images, and feelings" of my time in spoken word communities.²⁴ I was able to realize that the reason why I was so impacted and defined by those experiences, was because of the unique qualities that make Black folk religions so powerful and relevant. Connecting Sunni to Baby Suggs not only prompted me to reflect on my personal story, but it also led me to interrogate how my story relates to others, and the greater social contexts that shaped my epiphanic moment.

As demonstrated in my introduction, the genesis of this autoethnographic project was catalyzed by an epiphany moment and the testimony of my personal story. Autoethnography allows me to honor that initial impulse of inquiry, and then situate myself "in story-[my] own story, [and] the story told in existing writing and research on [my] topic or experience."²⁵ As a qualitative method, autoethnography provides the ideal way to give voice to my personal

²³ Tony E. Adams, *Doing Autoethnography* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014), 47.

²⁴ Adams, *Doing Autoethnography*, 47.

²⁵ Adams, *Doing Autoethnography*, 49.

experiences for the purpose of extending sociological understanding to the context and challenges facing Black communities today.²⁶

Defining Autoethnography

Heewan Chang succinctly describe autoethnography as “a qualitative research method that enables researchers to use their autobiographical and contextual data to gain a hermeneutical understanding of the societal context and, in turn, a sociocultural meaning of self.”²⁷ Furthering that definition, scholars explain how it is “an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (*graphy*) personalize experience (*auto*) in order to understand cultural experience (*etho*).²⁸ Because this method is a mixture of autobiography and ethnography, it is seen as both “process and product”.²⁹

Chang also describes how:

“autoethnography is a self-focused inquiry that utilizes autobiographical data as the basis for sociocultural analysis.” In this method, the researcher is placed “at that center of investigation as both a “subject” (researcher who does investigation) and an “object” (participant who is investigated).”³⁰

Because of my first-hand experiences within spoken word communities, and my personal connection to the subject as revealed by my epiphanic moment, I did not want to rely on

²⁶ Sarah Wall, “Easier Said than Done: Writing an Autoethnography,” *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* (March 2008): 38.

²⁷ Heewan Chang and Boyd Drick, *Spirituality in Higher Education: Autoethnographies* (Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2011), 13.

²⁸ Carolyn Ellis, Tony E. Adams, Arthur P Bochner, “Autoethnography: An Overview,” *Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 12, no. 1 (January 2011): 1.

²⁹ Ellis, Adams, Bochner, “Autoethnography: An Overview,” 1.

³⁰ Chang and Drick, *Spirituality in Higher Education: Autoethnographies*, 15.

traditional qualitative research conventions that “privileges objectivity” and “impersonal” stances from the researcher.”³¹

In contrast, I wanted to utilize the richness of my personal memory and self-reflection on the topic as meaningful autobiographic data. This qualitative method entails writing “retrospectively and selectively about epiphanies that stem from, or are made possible by, being part of a culture and/or by possessing a particular cultural identity.” It also includes the responsibility and requirement by social science publishing conventions to analyze these experiences.³²

Sarah Wall writes how autoethnography is held in suspicion and marginalized by some in the academy because it is perceived as “lacking, in comparison to quantitative methods”, and because they “do not adhere to traditional notions of objectivity, reason, and truth.”³³ However, this approach also challenges “canonical ways of doing research”, and even approaches “research as a political, socially-just and socially conscious act.”³⁴ Despite some valid critiques, ethical concerns, and doubts on the narrative reliability, autoethnography succeeds in “producing meaningful, accessible, and evocative research grounded in personal experience, research that would sensitize readers to issues of identity politics, to experiences shrouded in silence, and to forms of representation that deepen our capacity to empathize with people who are different from us.”³⁵

³¹ Chang and Drick, *Spirituality in Higher Education: Autoethnographies*, 15.

³² Ellis, Adams, Bochner, “Autoethnography: An Overview,” 3.

³³ Sarah Wall, “Easier Said than Done: Writing an Autoethnography,” *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* (March 2008): 47.

³⁴ Ellis, Adams, Bochner, “Autoethnography: An Overview,” 1.

³⁵ Ellis, Adams, Bochner, “Autoethnography: An Overview,” 2.

Because of the nature of my study, autoethnography was the method that yielded fruitful possibilities.

Method Justification

Beyond the usefulness of the ethnographic method to engage my personal story as valid data, it also provided me the freedom to document my research in a way that is liberated from normative academic conventions. Chang writes about the clash between opposing advocates in this field. There are those who believe autoethnography should follow a “basic research process—defining a research problem, setting a research purpose, developing research questions, collecting analyzing and interpreting data, and writing a research report.”³⁶ Others, like Ellis and Bochner, push for “a more free-spirited intuitive approach to self-exploration...[that does] not follow traditional reporting style of detailing their research process.”³⁷

Because of the variations in writing styles and how the method is applied, a wide range of autoethnographies have been produced. Sarah Wall distinguishes between the evocative style, which is confessional, emotional, therapeutic, creative, and unconventional, and the analytical style, which is descriptive, realistic, “accurate”, and academic.³⁸ Many autoethnographies are a mixture of these elements. This subjectivity sometimes leads to work being judged as either being too scientific or too artsy³⁹. Despite these controversies, the autoethnographic method was chosen because it best allows me to creatively approach the engagement of my story with history and theory, and it is written in a hybrid style that is both analytical and evocative.

³⁶ Chang and Drick, *Spirituality in Higher Education: Autoethnographies*, 13.

³⁷ Chang and Drick, *Spirituality in Higher Education: Autoethnographies*, 14.

³⁸ Sarah Wall, “Autoethnography: Possibility and Controversy” (IIQM Webinar Series: Power Point presentation 7/24/2014) accessed January 9, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pEWF0SV9F_s.

³⁹ Ellis, Adams, Bochner, “Autoethnography: An Overview,” 9-10.

A Journey through Houses

This project demonstrates, by autoethnography, how spoken word communities express the hybridity of Black folk religious traditions by creating sacred spaces through ritual performance and the enunciation of imaginative theologies. This is done by carrying elements of my story through three “houses” of engagement. These multiple houses are sites of encounter and dialogue between my story (through vignettes and poetry), history, and theory in order to provide analyses of my experiences in the Hartford CT poetry scene and with spoken word artist like Faraji Salim and Sunni Patterson. Each successive house provides me with new tools to explore my personal stories in order to gain new analytical insight.

Before the journey through the three “houses”, the following chapter provides a working definition of Black folk religion. Through discursive analysis, I contrast and compare the contributions of major interpreters of Black religion, including James Cone, Dwight Hopkins, Albert Raboteau, Gayraud Wilmore. I also use these scholars to provide a basic overview of Black folk religion especially in the late antebellum period. This concludes the first part of the paper.

The journey through the three houses begins the second part of this paper. The first “house” explores how spoken word communities express Black folk religious traditions through the lens of hybridity, and how it facilitates meaning-making and the enunciations of new identities. In this house, I converse with post-colonial theorist, Homi K. Bhabha, and others, to demonstrate how hybridity informed Black folk religious practices historically, and how it still operates in spoken word spaces today.

The second “house” investigates how spoken word communities express Black folk religious traditions in how “third spaces” are made sacred by ritual performance. This house allows for continued dialogue between postcolonial concepts like “third-space” with historical understandings of concepts like “sacred.” I then put my story in conversation with ritual theorists like Catherine Bell and Randall Collins to analyze how I have experienced sacred space being created by spoken word communities through ritual performance.

The third and final “house” examines the ways spoken word communities express Black folk religious traditions in how it produces a bricolage of “imaginative theologies.” By bricolage, I mean the construction of religious beliefs and practices drawing on a wide variety of cultural and theological resources. I use the concept of bricolage to interpret how theologies have been constructed, articulated, and practiced historically in Black folk religious traditions. I then put my story in conversation with the postmodern womanist theories of Monica Coleman to analyze how I have experienced the creation of imaginative theologies within spoken word communities.

The final chapter serves as an epilogue to the paper and describes opportunities for further research and my self-reflection on my experience with the autoethnographic process.

Chapter 3:

A Testimony: To Auntie

Continued (pt.3) ...

...And this is my story and my song—And I
truly feel the Spirit all day long

So please let me [testify]...

Of my gratitude-of how you- instilled within
me the value-of right and wrong

Delivering me wisdom of times gone-by
sparkling an ancient memory

One that was encoded within the hum, of
your melody

One that was done-in those times, when with
closed eyes you swayed and slowly—
moaned

Testifying to our people's expression of
suffering that grown

From a struggle to wrestle hope in a foreign
land far from home

And I'm remembering you singing spirituals
and it has got me in the zone

Like when I used to go down south and sit at
your feet as you told stories of old

Surrounding me with black and white
photos---with some faded sepia tone

Showing me stone faced ancestors who
known--- A type of pain from a place shut-
up deep in their bones

And I can hear you testify----in same way
that our ancestors must of looked to the sky

Saying, "There must be a God somewhere---
For there is music in the air."

And please let me [testify]

Chapter 3:

Black Folk Religion Traditions

Vignette 0:

**Peter's United Methodist Church:
Calvert County, MD: 10:45 AM**

I remember my trips down South as a kid. I remember those “steal-away” moments that colored my memory within that seemingly ancient church in Maryland; Cooper’s United Methodist Church.⁴⁰ I was there, immersed within a religious sensibility that was much different than that of the churches I attended in Connecticut. Still, even at a young age, I felt very much at home in my soul.

I remember the sun-bleached white paint barely holding onto that little wooden structure down’ road that sat in lowlands at the bottom of the hill near Hall Creek. I recall filing in under the hot country sun with people who looked and felt like me. I was one in the number of church sisters and family, known and unknown, mixed with other folks whose presence emanated a peculiar yet easy familiarity. I remember stopping on the top steps just before entering the double doors and smelling the distinct air of a Maryland summer. From there, I surveyed the soil of my parents and ancestors; a rural landscape of farmed plots spotted with old oaks, peeling birches, and deep pine woods.

I remember how it seemed like those old trees released the whispers of passed on spirits that passed on up those church steps past me; passing through those church doors and entering into the “no-time” with those, like me, who still live in our bodies.

⁴⁰ See Fig D.1 in Appendix D for picture.

I remember seeing myself surrounded by the kaleidoscopic vision of black and brown faces set in sincere intensity; an undeniable display of faith forged in fire. They swayed and moaned to old hymns accompanied by the gospel cadence of a hardly tuned piano. The anchoring presence of that instrument was positioned prominently up front by the wooden altar that had the maroon padding for kneeling. They sung tried songs and prayed true prayers with open hearts and closed eyes. They summoned God with raised hands that pointed towards the heavens; puncturing the thick summer air in the cramped space of the small sanctuary.

I remember seeing the crisp white uniform of an elderly usher; an ancient lady with gray eyes who extended her wrinkled black cupped hand to my young cheek saying, “*Chi’l, I d’clare, you done look jus’ like yo’ granddaddy*”. I can still hear the creaking sounds of wooden pews holding the shifting bodies of those whose bodies toiled too long in hot ‘bacco fields or as domestics in Ms. “So and So’s” house up’ road. I can still feel the breeze of paper fans sponsored by some funeral home moving the humid air; the picture of Martin Luther King Jr. or praying hands moving back and forth, back and forth, back and forth...

This was the realm of Auntie, the one who held the lived histories of Black folk religious traditions. Within the confines of that small church, there was a legacy of spirituality that was being imprinted deep within me. It was a lesson so indelibly pressed on my soul, that I would always be able to recognize its whispering witness whether I was in a traditional church space or not.

Black Folk Religion: Definition and Overview

“When de niggers go round singing’ ‘Steal Away to Jesus,’ dat mean dere gwine be a ‘ligious meetin’ dat night. De masters...didn’t like den ‘ligious meetin’s so us natcherly slips off at night, down in de bottoms or somewhere. Sometimes us sing and pray all night.”⁴¹

-former slave Wash Wilson

“My knee bones am aching,
My body’s rackin’ with pain,
I ‘lieve I’m a chile of God,
And this aint my home,
‘Cause Heaven’s my aim.”

-A slave song conveyed by former slave Anderson Edwards⁴²

During the times of the Antebellum South, there existed an extensive religious life among Blacks that thrived in the shadows. Oftentimes, under the cover of darkness, African slaves secretly gathered for prayer services that were punctuated by impassioned yet sometimes whispered songs and sermons. Albert Raboteau, one of the most prominent scholars of African and African American faith traditions, has aptly named this hidden religious life the “invisible institution” and the “folk religion of the slave community.”⁴³

The purpose of these meetings was not only to call upon the divine but also to ensure the survival of the Black community. This was accomplished by summoning the power and resilience to resist the psychological terrors of the systems of slavery while affirming a sense of innate human dignity. These clandestine and subversive practices could only commence in the moments of ‘stealing away,’ that is, the retreat to those hidden places tucked away from the white master’s perilous gaze. In this way, Black folk religion also countered the institutional

⁴¹ Albert Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The Invisible Institution in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 213.

⁴² Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 218.

⁴³ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 210.

religious system of the white church that principally sought to theologically reinforce the existing system of oppression.⁴⁴

In general, the term folk religion refers to “the totality of all those views and practices of religion that exist among people apart from and alongside the strictly theological and liturgical forms of the official religion.”⁴⁵ Folk religion often stands in tension with organized religion, as it captures the beliefs and behaviors that either pre-existed or developed alongside the organized structure. However, practitioners oftentimes resolve potential conflicts by either maintaining separate practices or by mixing borrowed elements from both in a pragmatic project of creating a syncretistic religious system.⁴⁶

Throughout this project, I use the term Black folk religion, to refer to the lived autonomous, and sometimes clandestine, communal customs, beliefs and rituals of African Americans that existed outside of white sanctioned religious structures. My focus is on a time frame which began with the coming of African slaves to America in 1619, and extends well beyond the end of slavery, the era of reconstruction (1865-1877), and beyond.

From the very beginning, there has been debate among the major interpreters of Black folk religion about the appropriateness of using the term, folk religion. Joseph Washington, who was among the first scholars to apply this term to African American faith practices, claimed that [African Americans] were “more focused on matters related to racial survival than on the promotion of true Christianity.”⁴⁷ Washington also stresses the communal purpose of Black folk

⁴⁴ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 96.

⁴⁵ Don Yoder, "Toward a Definition of Folk Religion," *Western Folklore* 33, no. 1 (January 1974): 14.

⁴⁶ Yoder, “Folk Religion,” 11.

⁴⁷ Alonzo Johnson and Paul Jersild, *Ain't Gonna Lay My 'Ligion Down* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1996), 3.

religion by noting that it connects African American in a manner that does not necessarily forge relationships with those outside of the Black experience. For Washington, Black folk religion's primary focus on resisting racial oppression was too parochial; betraying the universal and "true orthodox spirit of the Christian tradition."⁴⁸

James Cone, who later would become a major figure in Black theology, took great offense at what he perceived as Washington's denigration of the theology and practices of the Black Church. Cone countered Washington's assertions by arguing that what is labeled now as orthodox or normative in white Christianity was also shaped by folk traditions. A fuller response was developed in his book, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, where he argued that Christian "theology ceases to be a theology of the gospel when it fails to arise out of the community of the oppressed."⁴⁹ Further, Cone contended that privileging the combatting of white supremacy is appropriate because Christian theology and practices should be ultimately concerned about "God's liberating activity in the world" on behalf of those oppressed.⁵⁰

In response to the critiques of Cone and other black scholars, Washington later conceded that white Christianity also contained elements of folk religion since it was "complicit in the racial atrocities of American history and helped to create the staunchly hypocritical context in which Black folk religion would thrive."⁵¹

Though I am not as wedded to Cone's Christocentric worldview, I do agree with his main contention that all faith practices and religious sentiments are contextual and shaped by the particularity of needs that are revealed in specific times and places.

⁴⁸ Johnson and Jersild, *Ain't Gonna Lay*, 3.

⁴⁹ James Cone, *A Theology of Liberation* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1970), 1.

⁵⁰ Cone, *A Theology of Liberation*, 1.

⁵¹ Johnson and Jerslid, *Ain't Gonna Lay*, 3.

Barbara Holmes provides a helpful conceptual framework in her book, *Joy Unspeakable: Contemplative Practices of the Black Church*. Like Black folk religious traditions, Holmes defines the Black Church as the “dynamic religious entity forged in oppression and sustained by practices that were often covert and intuitive.”⁵² Noting the distinctions between “invisible institutions” and denominational churches, she describes how the “black church has an actual and meta-actual form...[and] it inhabits the imagination of its people in ways that far exceed its reach.”⁵³ She describes these traditions as an embodiment of a “spiritual idea” that has not only been the “spiritual wellspring” throughout history, but, in a sense, a “virtual space created by the worship practices of the congregation.”⁵⁴ Conceptualizing Black folk religious traditions as “virtual” or as an embodied spiritual idea that can be tapped into or channeled by way of practice, or ritual performance, broadens the perception on how these traditions can express in ways that may be deemed unconventional or even controversial.

Important Features of Black Folk Religion

While there is no universal consensus on what constitutes Black folk religion, scholarly treatments over the last fifty years have shed light on four important aspects of this complex subject: its critical adaptation of Christianity, its emergence from a wide variety of sources, the tension between its institutional and non-institutional aspects, and the creation of an alternative space in which Black lives were affirmed rather than denigrated.

⁵² Barbara Holmes, *Joy Unspeakable: Contemplative Practices of the Black Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 5.

⁵³ Holmes, *Joy Unspeakable*, 5.

⁵⁴ Holmes, *Joy Unspeakable*, 6.

Critical Adaptation of Christianity. Despite the divergent views among the major interpreters of Black folk religion, there appears to be a shared understanding that “black slaves did not so much adopt Christianity as adapt Christianity to themselves.”⁵⁵ Gayraud Wilmore, a preeminent scholar in the field of Black religious studies, asserts that unlike the preaching and teaching found in white churches during the period of slavery, Black folk expressions represented a “new religion of an oppressed people,” contained a definite moral judgment against slavery, and offered a clear legitimation of resistance to injustice.⁵⁶

Emergence from a Variety of Sources. Gilmore further argues that the genesis of Black folk traditions can be traced to the creative blending of religious and cultural sources. It drew on unique customs, beliefs, and practices from a wide variety of traditions. While the traditions inherited from “white” Christianity provided a basic framework, African slaves and their descendants made these beliefs and practices their own. Hence, Alonzo Johnson and Paul Jersild, editors of *Ain’t Gonna Lay My ‘Ligion Down*, have described Black folk religion as “putting flesh on the Christian beliefs” in a way that allows it to emerge as a “particular expression of faith emerging from a conjuncture of many streams –African, European, classic Judeo-Christian and American Indian – all of which meshed with the folk culture of black Americans.”⁵⁷

Tension between Institutional and Non-Institutional Aspects. In his seminal book, *Slave Religion: The Invisible Institution in the Antebellum South*, Raboteau highlights the dual aspects of slave religion: “The religion of the slaves was both institutional and non-institutional, visible

⁵⁵ Johnson and Jersild, *Ain’t Gonna Lay*, 4.

⁵⁶ Gayraud Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1972), 48.

⁵⁷ Johnson and Jersild, *Ain’t Gonna Lay*, 4.

and invisible, formally organized and spontaneously adapted.”⁵⁸ Though by the mid-19th century there existed independent black churches and slaves frequently outnumbered whites in racially mixed churches, the religious life of the slaves were never limited to those more visible institutional structures.⁵⁹

Similarly, William Montgomery describes how over the course of two centuries, “two kinds of churches evolved among African-Americans based on contrasting religious traditions.” The first kind of church was formally organized, denominationally affiliated, and included Northern free blacks. Further, its structure, theology, rules of order and worship were derived from white churches.⁶⁰ The second kind of ‘church’ constituted the invisible folk institutions of the southern slaves and was more “experiential and indigenous, in the sense that it was a syncretistic product of a dynamic African-American culture.”⁶¹

There were real tensions between the institutional and folk expressions of black religion, especially regarding the unquestioned belief in certain doctrines and in reference to notions of Black respectability. However, in their daily lives, enslaved Africans and their descendants developed the capacity to skillfully navigate these two parallel worlds.⁶² They found innovative ways of constructing communal beliefs and practices that met their spiritual needs – even if engaging in such beliefs and practices meant convening outside of formally designated and institutionally sanctioned religious spaces.

⁵⁸ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 212.

⁵⁹ Raboteau., *Slave Religion*, 212.

⁶⁰ William E. Montgomery, *Under Their Own Vine and Fig Tree: the African American Church in the South 1865-1900* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995), 36.

⁶¹ Montgomery, *Under Their Own Vine and Fig Tree*, 36.

⁶² Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 212.

After emancipation, when the need to “steal away” was no longer quite as necessary, many of the beliefs and practices inculcated within Black folk religion as the “invisible institution” eventually were hybridized within the institutional church; creating the distinctive elements of what is now often referred to as the Black Church.⁶³

Creation of Alternative Space. As described, the formal structures of belief and practice present in more institutionalized forms of Black worship, were supplemented and sometimes supplanted by illicit and clandestine nighttime prayer meetings in slave cabins, forest clearings, or brush arbors/hush harbors.⁶⁴ In the secrecy afforded by such alternative spaces, slaves were able to express a degree of freedom not afforded to them in the daytime. Indeed, during such gatherings, enslaved Africans and their descendants engaged in religious expressions that were not only liberating but also deeply affirming of Black bodies and indigenous cultural practices. The worship practiced in such alternative spaces pushed back against the systemic erasure of their humanity.

Underscoring the significance of such alternative spaces, Dwight Hopkins writes that Black folk religion afforded a place where a Black humanity “forged its unadulterated self with the attendance of God’s Spirit.” Under the pressures of slavery, a uniquely African American theological imagination was forged by “synthesizing memories of African religious structures and practices with reinterpreted Christian beliefs.”⁶⁵

⁶³ Montgomery, *Under Their Own Vine and Fig Tree*, 37.

⁶⁴ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 212.

⁶⁵ Dwight N. Hopkins and George C.L. Cummings, eds., *Cut Loose Your Stammering Tongue: Black Theology in the Slave Narratives*, 2nd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 29.

Conclusion

The creative ingenuity and innovation that characterizes the development of Black folk religion is not only a matter of history or academic intrigue. Rather, a living legacy of religious life can still be discerned today. This history offers a framework, and a “virtual space” that can be accessed by those inspired to resist injustice and struggle for a life-affirming vision of total liberation and wholeness. It is my experience that this legacy lives on through the practices in spoken word communities. They signify to the history of the invisible institution while creating new sacred spaces outside the confines of church. Through ritual performance and the enunciating of adapted and imaginative theologies, spoken word communities recreate moments of “stealing away” in these present times.

The second part of this paper carries elements of my story through the three “houses” of engagement. These following houses are sites of dialogue between my story (through vignettes and poetry), history, and theory in order to provide relevant analysis.

A Testimony: To Auntie

Conclusion (pt.4) ...

.... Saying, “There must be a God
somewhere---
For there is music in the air.”

And please let me [testify]

That today right here, we still speak of a
God who can no longer stand for injustice
anywhere

And we now move prayers once directed to
the sky into the prayers of marching feet.

And we testify not just in the pews but in the
intersections and in the streets.

And we express our faith as we gather-- and
testify to our humanity and that our lives do
in fact matter

And though we might not rock a wooden
afro pic—we may still raise a solo black
fist—or may even take a knee like
Kaepernick

To testify to the injustice of black bodies
being shot quick-To testify to the rash of
black bodies turn statistics—its sick

How unwilling martyrs bleed in our city
streets that too often streak scarlet

Whether in Baton Rouge, St. Paul, Tulsa, or
in Charlotte

And we don’t need to be hesitant because of
the *Trumped-up* petulance of the president
now in residence

Cuz when it comes to our resistance, the
depths of our soul-force can transcend time
and distance

Extending from Oakland to DC back to
Ferguson we be serving in-our prayers
through protest to attest to a truth from deep
within our core

That we who believe in freedom shall not
rest whether we’re here--or on the corner of
North and Penn in West Baltimore

For we come from testifying folk!

So, Auntie,

I am grateful for your legacy—and though I
may talk about God a little differently

I see you testifying in the pews---as part of a
tradition of resistance that proves

That a raised voice, from a raised body,
from your raised hand whether raised-in
protest or in praise-

Can testify to a God who is present with us
even in the midst of suffering and harm

And that even as we struggle we can always
trust, that God has got us, in everlasting
arms

And so please let me [testify]

We are carried on, as we carry on
We are carried on, as we carry on
We are carried on, as we carry on
Amen

--

Part 2:

A Journey through Houses

Chapter 4:

House 1: Hybridity and Identity

Vignette 1:

Nuyorican Poets Café: Cultural Center and Performance Space East Village, New York City: 11:30pm⁶⁶

The poet, Faraji Salim, is a force of nature. He ascends the steps of the stage with a confidence that is instantly infectious and charming. He is performing a feature set at the Nuyorican Poets Café and though it is getting close to midnight, the energy of the relatively small poetry spot is undeniably heightened. He is a Jersey-born poet, so he brings a certain extra swagger to his style in order to represent in the presence of the other New York City poets. This night, I am sitting up in the loft because I will also be performing a piece later that night on the same stage. It would be one of my greatest honors. Perfectly contrasted by the brick wall behind him, Faraji adjusts the microphone upwards to his level and lets out a smile.⁶⁷ It's about to go down...

The Nuyorican Poets café was founded by Miguel Algarín, Miguel “Miky” Pinero and others in the early 70’s. It can to be a haven of communal affirmation in the same way that the ol’ Methodist church in Southern Maryland was for my family. “The Nuyorican” came into national prominence in the 1990’s with the advent of Slam Poetry and other forms of performance poetry and theater. It quickly became known as the Poetry Mecca, and talented poets like Saul Williams and others gained their notoriety in that space. The philosophy and

⁶⁶ See Fig D.2 in Appendix D for picture.

⁶⁷ See Fig D.2 in Appendix D for picture.

purpose of the café was to “reveal poetry as a living art”⁶⁸, and it created a space for artists to speak their truth. Algarin writes how “there need be no separation between politics and poetry.”⁶⁹

Faraji begins by singing the first line of the national anthem, “Oh say can you see, by the dawns early lights”. He then interrupts the familiar tune with his signature quick spit-fire delivery, and goes into verse:

...Light from the early dawn’s fire that lit up the sky in
downtown New York City
could it be the twisted metal in the helter skelter of the artist formerly
known as the WTC
never knew that a building could be assassinated like President Kennedy
or that of a resident wordsmith like Pac or Biggie
But in one instance we did see...

Faraji continued this pattern of singing a line of the national anthem and following it with verse that offers poetic commentary. “Through the perilous fight...”

...fight who? Al-Qaeda and bin Laden?
Or the ghost of America's forefathers
Cuz ain't nothing but a bunch of dead presidents that done got us in this mess anyway
that done passed away—and left us,
the future generations, this [crazy] mess to face...⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Miguel Algarín and Bob Holman, eds., *Aloud: Voices from the Nuyorican Poets Cafe* (New York, NY: Henry Holt and Company, 1994), 8.

⁶⁹ Algarín and Holman, *Aloud: Voices*, 10.

⁷⁰ See Appendix D for a link to the poem, “Star Spangled Banner” by Faraji Salim.

He finishes his rendition of the national anthem by singing of the star strangled banner,
and how this is still the home of the slave.

After the cacophony of applause, we were all left with the lingering question of what it meant to be Black and American in the post 9/11 era? Just because there was a new “enemy”, does that mean Blacks get to be fully American? This country’s history tells us something different, but it took the poet’s prophetic poem to give words to complex feelings about African American’s hybrid identities.

Hybridity: Definition and Overview

“One ever feels his twoness-an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.”⁷¹

-W. E. B. Du Bois

History of the Terminology. Hybridity is often used to describe “a wide range of social and cultural phenomenon involving “mixing”, and has become a well used concept within the context of both cultural criticism and post-colonial theory.⁷² Before Paul Gilroy, Stuart Hall, Lian Chambers and especially Homi Bhabha related hybridity primarily with the “mixing and combination in the moment of cultural exchange,”⁷³ it was used as a concept in Western Thought. Beginning in the eighteenth century with the development of the natural sciences, hybridity was associated with botany and zoology, and generally referred to the outcome of the crossing or cross-breeding of two separate varieties of plants or animals.

⁷¹ W. E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folks* (New York: Penguin Books, 1969), 45.

⁷² John Hutnyk, Kalra Virinder, and Kaur Raminder, *Contact Zones Hybridity and Diaspora* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2005), 2.

⁷³ Hutnyk, Virinder, and Raminder, *Contact Zones*, 1.

The concept of hybridity became more problematic in the nineteenth century as debates about the origin of the human species commenced; initiating the categorization of races. Questions arose about whether different races were of the same species and ontological arguments began positioning whites as superior to all other races especially Blacks.⁷⁴ Within that context, hybridity was employed to discuss the “mulatto” as mixed breeds or products of miscegenation.⁷⁵ More, the stigmatization and (apostasy) of the mulatto, or hybrid bodies, served as a warning against race mixing, reinforced notions of race purity, and later became part of the “scientific” justification for the legality of slavery.⁷⁶

Despite those troubling origins, the perspectives afforded by hybridity are now “celebrated and privileged as a kind of superior cultural intelligence owing to the advantage of in-betweenness.”⁷⁷ Further, the importance of hybridity is increasingly heightened as the ability to straddle multiple cultures and navigate difference that, not only offers valuable perspective, but a significant life skill that is essential in today’s diverse world.

Definition and Usage. For the purpose of this project, hybridity refers to the fusion or “mixing together of previously discrete cultural elements to create new meanings and identity.”⁷⁸ I also defer to a fuller definition given by New Testament Professor, Julius-Kei Kato: “the mixture of phenomena, in particular culture, tradition, race, ethnicity, and religion that have been

⁷⁴ Christopher Baker, *The Hybridity Church in the City* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, 2007), 13.

⁷⁵ Baker, *Hybridity Church*, 13.

⁷⁶ Paul Meredith, *Hybridity in the Third Space: Rethinking Bi-cultural Politics in Aotearo/New Zealand* (Waikato: University of Waikato, 1998), 2.

⁷⁷ Meredith, *Hybridity in the Third Space*, 2.

⁷⁸ Chris Baker, *The Sage Dictionary of Cultural Studies* (London: Sage Publications, 2004), 89.

hitherto commonly considered self-contained, monolithic and distinct from others. The mixture occurs to such an extent that a *tertium quid* [third thing] often results.”⁷⁹

Kato continues to note that hybridity essentially blurs the distinctions in a process of dynamic boundary-crossings and mixing between categories.⁸⁰ This traversing of boundaries that inform the process of hybridity creates “mixed or hyphenated identities of persons or ethnic communities.”⁸¹ For this reason I refer to persons of African heritage brought to America as slaves as African-American. I do this not as a static identification, but as an acknowledgement of the ongoing creative and re-constitutive process of forging a unique hybrid identity.

Homi K. Bhabha and Hybridity.

Homi K. Bhabha, a noted professor and theorist in post-colonial work, is a key figure in the development of the concepts of hybridity and third space. His works describe how hybridity “arose out of the culturally internalized interaction between colonizers and the “colonized.”⁸²

This idea is elaborated by New Zealand scholar, Paul Meredith:

“Hybridity is the process by which the colonial governing authority undertakes to translate the identity of the colonized (the Other) within a singular universal framework, but instead create the condition for something new. The new hybrid identity or subject-position emerges from the interweaving of elements of the colonizer and colonized challenging the validity and authenticity of any essentialist identity.”⁸³

⁷⁹ Kei Kato, *Diasporic Hybridity, Hermeneutics and Christian Identity: Asian American Theological Voices on Diasporic Hybridity, Its Implications for Hermeneutics and the Question of Christian Identity* (Berkeley, CA: Graduate Theological Union, 2006), 25.

⁸⁰ Kato, *Diasporic Hybridity*, 25.

⁸¹ Peter Brooker, *Cultural Theory: A Concise Glossary* (New York: Oxford Press, 1999), 105.

⁸² Haj Yazdih, “Conceptualizing Hybridity: Deconstructing Boundaries through the Hybrid,” *Formations: The Graduate Center Journal of Social Research*, no. 1 (2010): 31.

⁸³ Meredith, *Hybridity in the Third Space*, 2.

Bhabha's idea of the malleability of cultural identity, and that new hybrid expressions that can be manipulated from the "interweaving" of seemingly discreet elements, is evident in a case study featuring the British Black theologian Robert Beckford. Born in the United Kingdom from Jamaican immigrants, Beckford sought to create a liberation theology that successfully reconciled the varied threads of his Afro-Caribbean religious and cultural heritages. He did this by mixing the liberative elements of Christian Pentecostalism with the Rastafarian concept of "dread" which he describes as the "Black experience of finding one's true identity, consciousness, and place in the world."⁸⁴ Though there were many ideological aspects that were incompatible, Beckford was able to find some areas of overlap; "holding together in creative dialogue the tension" between his Christian and ethnic identity."⁸⁵ Beckford's work of hybridity in the spaces of Black Pentecostal churches in the UK, demonstrates how one's hybridity can be intentionally used in creative projects of liberation and empowerment for marginalized communities.

Negotiation and Enunciation. Hybridity can be used as an "evocative term for the formation of identity and code for creativity and for translation."⁸⁶ The main activity of translation is negotiation, whereby "antagonistic or contradictory elements are brought together, [in] pragmatic discourses that will lead to new hybrid discourses and identities."⁸⁷ Enunciation could be described as a mode of utterance and the act of articulating distinction or difference, from two (or more) recognizable sites of cultural identities.⁸⁸

⁸⁴ Baker, *Hybridity Church*, 22.

⁸⁵ Baker, *Hybridity Church*, 22-23.

⁸⁶ Hutnyk, Virinder, and Raminder, *Contact Zones*, 2.

⁸⁷ Baker, *Hybridity Church*, 21.

⁸⁸ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York, New York: Routledge, 1994), 36.

Bhabha's articulation of negotiation and enunciation can be viewed as a refinement of German philosopher, George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's idea of the dialectical process. In that concept, a synthesis is formed out of a thesis and antithesis. Unlike Hegel, who posited this negotiation as a one-time event in history, Bhabha saw negotiation as a continuous process of micro-adjustments that treats even syntheses as being no less fluid and provisional.⁸⁹ Bhabha continues, "The social articulation of difference, from the minority perspective, is a complex, ongoing negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities in moments of historical transformation."⁹⁰ From this, it is important to emphasize that the project of hybridity is a dynamic ever-changing enterprise; necessitating new sites of practice that can hold that creative impulse.

Critiques. Theorists of hybridity offer it as an antidote to "essentialism", or the belief that cultural identities possess "invariable and fixed properties which define the "what-ness" of a given entity."⁹¹ However, the irony remains that the idea of hybrid identities "relies upon the proposition of non-hybridity...or the existence of an anterior pure culture that precedes mixing."⁹² To be fair, theorists like Paul Gilroy reject the notion of an anterior pure, but such admissions do not prevent the linguistic challenges inherent in explaining theories of hybridity.

Another critique is of Bhabha himself. Critics complain that his formulation of hybridity was a product of being a "cosmopolitan elite", or one of the privileged Third World intellectuals

⁸⁹ Baker, *Hybridity Church*, 22.

⁹⁰ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 2.

⁹¹ Paul Meredith, *Hybridity in the Third Space*, 2.

⁹² Hutnyk, Virinder, and Raminder, *Contact Zones*, 2.

who “consume global culture at a rarefied level.”⁹³ This critique contends that Bhabha tends to minimize the lived material conditions and suffering of those “caught at the sharp end of migratory experience.”⁹⁴, as well as the impact of uneven power dynamics. While acknowledging these critiques, for the purpose of this project, the theory of hybridity offers a foundational lens to view identity formation. It is especially useful as I turn that lens to see how it was employed in the creation of an African American identity and Black folk religion.

Hybridity and The Development of African American Identity

“She had forgotten the name of her tribe; even the names of her parents had slipped from her memory; but the river which she has been taught to worship in her infancy had worn deep channels in that treacherous memory. This deep, abiding superstition made it comparatively easy for her to transfer her identity to some stream in her new home. By consequence she became a Baptist, or rather an immersionist...”⁹⁵

(As conveyed by a white Southerner about an African woman in South Carolina)

For Africans arriving as slaves to America, the psychological pain of enslavement, displacement, and the shattering of a native African world view, “necessitated the creation of a new identity that satisfied the needs of survival.”⁹⁶ Like the woman in the above quote, this survival instinct included finding ways to incorporate life-affirming elements of even the faintest memory an earlier African identity into the symbols and practices of their American context.

These exercises of hybridity not only contributed to the resilience to survive the trauma of slavery but aided in the creation of the mixed or hyphenated identity of the African American slave community.

⁹³ Baker, *Hybridity Church*, 24.

⁹⁴ Baker, *Hybridity Church*, 24.

⁹⁵ John Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 75.

⁹⁶ Montgomery, *Under Their Own Vine and Fig Tree*, 13.

Africans had to contend with multiple identities in the process of negotiating the development of an African American identity. First, they had to confront with how white society valued them as nothing more than chattel or beasts of burden.⁹⁷ This perspective fueled the project of creating an imposed slave identity. Secondly, enslaved Africans had to reconcile into their identities the vestiges of their indigenous African heritage and ancestral legacies. This had to be done in a place that was not only geographically removed from the origin of those retentions, but hostile to any overt African cultural expressions.⁹⁸

Undoubtedly, there were many other factors that were critical to identity formation including gender, class (proximity to the master), colorism, literacy, etc... However, for the purpose of this project, I am most concerned about how enslaved Africans sought to create a self-authored hybrid African-American racial identity; one that was informed by the mixing of African religious and cultural resources, white Protestant Christianity, and the folk wisdom developed while living in America.

Hybridity: Negotiating an Imposed Identity

In the book, *Down, Up, and Over: Slave Religion and Black Theology*, Dwight Hopkins makes a helpful distinction to explain the central tension involved in the development of the African American identity. First, he describes the “Sunup to Sundown” period. This corresponded to the time that “white Protestant slave owners took the initiative to fashion former Africans into physically enslaved, spiritually stunted, and culturally subordinated African

⁹⁷ Dwight N. Hopkins, *Down, Up and Over: Slave Religion and Black Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000), 53.

⁹⁸ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 4.

Americans.”⁹⁹ This exploitative system, being a gross exaggeration of a capitalist market, forcefully conspired to not only enslave Black bodies but to psychologically create a slave identity.

Theological Justifications. Beyond the intentions of stripping Africans of their humanity by transforming them into mere commodities through the mechanisms of socio-political and economic systems, this process of degradation was also theologically justified. The white theology of the day, “forced its domination upon black life by maintaining ruthless control and rendering slaves subservient to white humanity.”¹⁰⁰ In many ways, church became the place where slaves were taught to equate God with the image of the white master, and many slave narratives speak of how the Bible and scripture was employed to justify the “peculiar institution” of slavery. Often the slave catechism was taking from Ephesians and the message could easily be summed up as “Obey your masters, be good slaves.”¹⁰¹ Paraphrasing a white preacher during the time of slavery, ex-slave Jenny Procter restates:

Now I takes my text, which is, Nigger obey your master and your mistress, ‘cause what you git from them here in this world am all you ever going to git, ‘cause you just like the hogs and the other animal—when you dies you ain’t no more, after you been throwed in that hole.¹⁰²

To summarize, Hopkins describes the “Sunup to Sundown” period as the master’s attempt to dehumanize enslaved Africans as objects of labor. It was also a time to create a, “black labor complex for white profit, a network of discipline, control and classification, and a multidimensional architecture of slavery for the blacks.”¹⁰³ Though the need to negotiate this

⁹⁹ Hopkins, *Down, Up, and Over*, 51.

¹⁰⁰ Hopkins and Cummings, *Cut Loose Your Stammering Tongue*, 7.

¹⁰¹ Hopkins and Cummings, *Cut Loose Your Stammering Tongue*, 8.

¹⁰² Hopkins and Cummings, *Cut Loose Your Stammering Tongue*, 9.

¹⁰³ Hopkins, *Down, Up and Over*, 53.

project of imposed or forced identity formation was an ever-present stress on the psyche of those enslaved, it also led them to invent innovative survival methods to both combat those destructive pressures, and affirm their basic sense of human dignity.

Hybridity: New Enunciations and the Re-Creation of Self

In contrast to the aforementioned “Sunup to Sundown” period, the “Sundown to Sunup” period was when enslaved Africans exercised the autonomy to self-author their identity as an act of resistance. They embarked on this enterprise with a sense of divine purpose and a determined desire to “reconstitute and recreate their own reality.”¹⁰⁴ According to Hopkins, this re-creation process was accomplished by utilizing the resources of the black self in order to seize sacred domains, affirm the right to resist, and construct a syncretized religion.¹⁰⁵ Further, the foundational tools of this process were the vestiges of African religious resources, a reinterpretation of the Christianity presented to them by the slave masters, and the incorporation of multiple sources of folk wisdom.

African Religious Resources. The African heritage of slaves included distinct perspectives about God. First, there was an understanding of a High God or Almighty God who was innately good, the Creator of all things, and the chief power in the universe.¹⁰⁶ An example of this is the Akan/Ashanti phrase “Gye Nyame.” This phrase literally means, “Except God” or “Only God”, and symbolizes the Omnipotence, Omnipresence, and Omniscience of God.¹⁰⁷

Though God was seen as the Creator of the universe, God was also viewed as an intimate

¹⁰⁴ Hopkins, *Down, Up and Over*, 108.

¹⁰⁵ Hopkins, *Down, Up and Over*, 108.

¹⁰⁶ Hopkins and Cummings, *Cut Loose Your Stammering Tongue*, 4.

¹⁰⁷ Willis, *The Adinkra Dictionary: A Visual Primer on the Language of Adinkra*, 114-115.

presence and actor in the life of the community. Despite God's vast cosmic attributes and roles, God was still experienced as the "patron of the family", and as the most senior member or guardian of the community.¹⁰⁸

Second, there was an understanding that God is merciful and compassionate. Hopkins writes, "As Guardian and Keeper, God is named the "Protector of the poor" by some African traditional religions."¹⁰⁹ God was also seen as partial to those marginalized by society, and the value of compassionate hospitality to the "other" was manifested in the cultural expectation to treat the "stranger" as if one is having an encounter with God.¹¹⁰

Thirdly, African traditional religions were informed by an African cosmology that insisted that the "individual exists or has its being in relation to the community."¹¹¹ This worldview posited a "dynamic interplay between community and the individual in all matters including liberation and spirituality."¹¹² The preeminence of community is expressed in the statement, "I am because we are; and because we are, I am."¹¹³ Therefore, the act of reconstituting the Black self simultaneously revealed the need to create a new sense of community, and disclosed the concurrent need to establish new spaces to practice rituals that provided identity, communicated shared values, and reinforced norms that unified the group.

¹⁰⁸ Flora Wilson Bridges, *Resurrection Song: African American Spirituality* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2001), 21.

¹⁰⁹ Hopkins and Cummings, *Cut Loose Your Stammering Tongue*, 4.

¹¹⁰ Bridges, *Resurrection Song*, 40.

¹¹¹ Hopkins, *Down, Up, and Over*, 108.

¹¹² Dwight N. Hopkins, *Shoes that Fit Our Feet: Sources for a Constructive Black Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993), 17.

¹¹³ Bridges, *Resurrection Song*, 108.

Lastly, the community was viewed as being comprised of “both the living and the dead,” and all creation was connected to God and to each other.¹¹⁴ As such, the ancestors, though not present in physical form, were still very much present and honored in the life of the community. For example, in Yoruba, the ancestors were seen as “immediate intermediaries” between the living and “supersensual” world.¹¹⁵ Further, there was a veneration of the ancestors in their role of providing guidance and protection for those still living and for facilitating the preservation and memory of the “cultural heritage of the community.”¹¹⁶

There were many performative aspects in worship that retained African influences, but that will be expanded later in this project. What is important to note is that though enslaved Africans came from a variety of tribes and languages, there was a shared value system, cosmological perspective, and patterns of rituals that formed a unifying foundation to develop new and distinct African American religious identities and practices.¹¹⁷

Christian Resources. The tools of preexisting African religious resources mixed with Christian language, images, and motifs; offering an innovative opportunity to re-create themselves and disrupt the slave-identity narrative. Wilmore writes, “It was within an African religious framework that the slaves made adjustments to Christianity after hearing the gospel.”¹¹⁸ The slaves rejected the “white supremacist theologies and sought to encounter the biblical God in their own theological creativity.”¹¹⁹ Such exercises of theological rejection and creativity

¹¹⁴ Bridges, *Resurrection Song*, 17.

¹¹⁵ Bridges, *Resurrection Song*, 18.

¹¹⁶ Hopkins and Cummings, *Cut Loose Your Stammering Tongue*, 5.

¹¹⁷ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 7.

¹¹⁸ Wilmore, *Black Religion*, 50.

¹¹⁹ Hopkins, *Shoes*, 22.

demonstrated that flexible interpretative approaches to theology existed in Black folk religious traditions.

From the perspective of the enslaved Africans, the most pressing and existential issue was attaining comprehensive freedom from the evils of slavery. They saw in the Exodus story, an all-powerful God who was active in history, concerned with realizing justice for the poor and marginalized, and intervening on behalf of the enslaved.¹²⁰ In Jesus, they were able to see a healer, a friend in the midst of trials and tribulations, and a mediator of God's incarnational presence (similar to the role of an ancestor).¹²¹ Ultimately, Jesus was viewed as a liberator who, though coming from a lowly position in life, brought salvation to the soul, and freedom to the captive bodies of those oppressed.¹²²

Folk Tales and Custom. Folk Tales were useful in developing an African American identity because they “distilled folk wisdom” into the easily transmittable oral form of storytelling. The constructions and wisdom of these stories and customs were continuously adapted and assigned new meaning as they were contextualized on American soil. The telling of these stories were oftentimes the function of certain elders who, in the tradition of the role of an African “griot”, took on the responsibility of preserving cultural heritage by means of storytelling.¹²³

Not only did the performance of these folk tales provide entertainment and communal connection, historian, John Blassingame, remarks how the lessons in the folk tales were used as

¹²⁰Hopkins, *Shoes*, 23.

¹²¹ Hopkins, *Shoes*, 24.

¹²² Hopkins, *Shoes*, 35.

¹²³ Bridges, *Resurrection Song*, 47.

an instructional guide for survival.¹²⁴ Lastly, folk tales functioned subversively by creating stories that could clandestinely express hostility and poke fun at the master. Stories that featured High John the Conqueror (an African Christ-figure) and Bur Rabbit, (a trickster figure like the spider *Anansi* in African folklore), instilled a sense of hope by imagining characters who were able to overcome their lowly position by their cleverness or wit.¹²⁵

Beyond folk tales, the re-creation process occurred by assembling the “bits of African faith and practices that persisted in folk beliefs and customs.”¹²⁶ Raboteau conveys a story about an elderly New Orleans woman who was anxiously searching for an object in the middle of a thunderstorm. She ran in “rapid quest” until she found the “object of search”; a simple axe for chopping wood. Taking the axe, she swung it over her head in the “very face of the rushing current, as if chopping some invisible thing in twain.”¹²⁷ After, she did this, the storm subsided.

Folklorist and Educator Newbell Niles Puckett, who captured many folktales and customs in his book, *The Magic and Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro*, notes that other similar stories speak of chopping the ground in the face of an approaching storm, sticking a spade in the ground to split the cloud, or simply placing an axe in the corner of the house to calm a storm. What is of note, is that the axe is a sacred emblem of the Yoruba orisha of thunder and lightning named Shango.¹²⁸ Orishas are generally defined as aspects or faces of the High God Oludumare. They are symbolized in nature, and capable of providing spiritual guidance.¹²⁹ It is possible that these

¹²⁴ Blassingame, *Slave Community*, 127.

¹²⁵ Bridges, *Resurrection Song*, 50.

¹²⁶ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 81.

¹²⁷ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 81.

¹²⁸ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 81.

¹²⁹ Janet “Sula Spirit” Evans, *Spirit of the Orisha* (New Orleans, LA: Sula Spirit LLC, 2014), vii.

practices could have been used as an African derived acknowledgment and appeasement of the forces contained in the storm.

Elements of these practices remain and are still practiced in some places in the South as a folk custom. What is significant is that these folk customs and beliefs were constructively used in the project of reconstituting the Black self into the hybrid identity of African American. Further, the historical proclivity to use art, and the receptivity of storytelling as a valid source of meaning-making and meaning-sharing, remains evident in places where spoken word is performed.

Spoken Word: Hybridity and Identity: An Analysis

When Faraji Salim mounted the stage of the Nuyorican Poets Café in New York City, he was doing more than entertaining with his spoken word that evening. He was engaged in the hybrid project of negotiating and enunciating new meaning in the post 9/11 world. It was a performative process that was creatively informed by the cultural intelligence inherent within the complex formation of his hybrid African American identity. His poem was a skillful product born from the dynamic and on-going negotiating of an imposed identity wrought by racist social infrastructures, and the desire to enunciate a “Black self” with the power to self-author one’s own reality.

Through Faraji’s performance, he made the Nuyorican poets café a “Sundown to Sunup” place and reinstated the functional role that Black folk religious traditions have played in communal meaning-making. Undoubtedly, there were Black churches that were addressing the impact and challenges of 9/11 on Black communities. However, it was rare that conventional

religious spaces could address the issue with such bluntness in language and tone; free from having to align or reconcile commentary within the parameters of accepted religious conventions or denominational norms. Through both song and verse, he reminded the community of W.E.B. DuBois' wise observation about Black life:

“One ever feels his twoness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.”¹³⁰

In the post 9/11 world, Faraji pushed back against the urge by some in the Black community to ignore the reality of the “two warring ideals in one dark body” and subsume their “two-ness” into a safer more essentialist identity of American. His poem forced the audience back into the sometimes contentious and continuous dynamic of negotiating and reconstituting Black identity in response to new challenges. The poet's dogged strength was conveyed by his presence, and his words cut like an axe against the proffered catechisms of nationalism that was augmented by the proliferation of flag-waving rhetoric. His message was mediated by the clever wit that was inherited from the folklorist tradition; subverting a familiar song like the national anthem by providing biting satirical commentary. He also tapped into the spirit of the *griot*, the storyteller, to trouble one's understanding of who is deemed the enemy. He implored the audience to critically think of the history of this country and the infrastructure of white supremacy constructed, not by the Taliban or Al-Qaeda, but its own racist forefathers.

In the last line of his poem, Faraji reminds the audience that the “home of the brave” is also the “home of the slave.” This spoken word piece delivered at the Nuyorican Poets Café demonstrated the legacy of Black folk religious traditions by expressing the impetus within

¹³⁰ DuBois, *Souls*, 45.

hybridity to continuously interrogate identity and create new meaning. The performance itself was an enunciating of a poetic “third” thing in the face of new challenges, in this case, the aftermath of a major national tragedy.

Historically, the work of hybridity and identity could only occur when enslaved Africans found the psychological or alternative geographical spaces to do this creative work. Through Black folk religious practices, these alternate, or “third spaces” were made sacred by ritual performance. The Nuyorican Poets café was transformed into a sacred space that night, and the capacity within African Americans to do the spiritual work of preventing one’s soul from being “torn asunder” was out pictured by the forceful poetic offerings of Faraji Salim.

Chapter 5

House 2: Third Space and the Sacred

Vignette 2:

Cofi's Brownstone:

Hungerford Street, Hartford CT 10:30pm

Instead of going to the poetry spot, we sometimes gathered at a house. What appeared like mere parties masked the true depths of soul-caress that occurred in these sacred occasions that seem to organically unfold with divinely serendipitous order. We gathered bearing our gifts and offerings; gems of self-revelatory insight ensconced in poetry-filled notebooks or tithes of tasty dishes of curry goat, ox tail, fish and rice and beans. Others brought varying music from Erykah Badu, Fela Kuti, Thelonious Monk, to Fiona Apple.

Within these usually cramped urban residential settings, filled with the aromas of Caribbean food and the melodies of soulful and sometimes eclectic music, I experienced a new sense of human connection. We shared with each under the banner of intimate authenticity and celebrated our mutual vulnerability. Together we engaged in conversations that ranged from pop culture frivolity to philosophical and existential matters. Deep into the night and sometimes into the dawn we congregated; sharing poetry, dancing, eating, vibing, and sprinkling our tea or coffee with the sounds of laughter, the syllables of our diatribes, or even the saltiness of our tears...

This night we gathered at our friend Cofi's house. She lived on the third floor of a multi-family home in downtown Hartford. We nicknamed it "The Brownstone" because of its color, and because it sounded fancier.¹³¹

I remember our togetherness. I remember sharing poetry while encircled in her living room with a djembe drum from Ghana presiding in the center. I remember my friend admitting her struggle with her family's rejection because she came out as a lesbian. I remember her breaking down in my brother's arms and the tears being OK. I remember us freestyling healing words in a cypher that went past the midnight hour. I remember the prayers; a mixture of Christian scriptures, Islamic texts, Rastafarian wisdom, African chants, and humming.

I remember Cofi saying that she had nothing to fix us to eat, but then appeared from the kitchen with a bag of rice and a several cans of beans. Like the little boy approaching Jesus with a few loaves of bread and two fish, she multiplied those basic foods with the spices in her kitchen, and the channeled creativity of her Guyanese mother. I remember how we all ate together from a variety of bowls. I remember giving thanks.

In Cofi's Brownstone, and other similar house gatherings, a new type of communal church took bloom; a place where fresh religious rituals flowered unencumbered. We congregated weekly or monthly to identity as a community and affirmed our individual devotional practices of writing by participating in an almost confessional act of sharing. More than a poetic potluck, our poems were brought to a communal table with Eucharistic reverence. It may seem stereotypical, but there was a certain spiritual reality that was reflected in the material presence of the burning candles and lit incense.

¹³¹ See Fig E.1-2 in Appendix E for pictures.

In that space, we were suspended in the vast liminality of the “in-between” time that makes a mockery of the clock. We dwelled together in a place where our practices created a new sense of freedom, community, and home despite the diversity of our thoughts and backgrounds. We experience God in an ease-filled and organic way, and our spoken word sparked something that was hard to define; something sacred, maybe even something salvific.

Third Space: Definition and Overview

“The invisible institution, in a word, exemplified the raw African American human life. Assembled deep in the woods with only an overturned pot for protection, African Americans found worship *space* in which to thrive”¹³²

Third Space is the “liminal or in-between” space that allows for the passage between fixed identifications and opens up the possibility of cultural hybridity.¹³³ It is characterized in part by its disruptiveness, possibilities in its liminal ambivalence, the facilitation of “communitas”, and the establishment of a new place of “home” for those with hybrid identities.

Hybridity and Third Space. In Bhabha’s discussions on hybridity, he refers to a “third space” of ambivalence in the context of what might uneasily, be called the colonial cultural interface.”¹³⁴ He contends that this “in-between” space, rather than the space on the binary poles of the One vs. the Other (for example the Colonizer of the Colonized, the Oppressor or the Victim), “carries the burden of the meaning of culture.”¹³⁵ Therefore, it is in the context of this third space where cultural negotiations take place and minorities are given the liberty to construct their own sense of identity. Hybridity is closely aligned to the notion of third space, because it is

¹³² Hopkins, *Down, Up, and Over*, 45.

¹³³ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 4.

¹³⁴ Hutnyk, Virinder, and Raminder, *Contact Zones*, 1.

¹³⁵ Baker, *Hybridity Church*, 25.

both “a consequence of it, but also the overall context within which a third space can operate.”¹³⁶
As such, third space and hybridity are interrelated and interdependent.

Bhabha describes a “third space enunciation which is volatile, unstable, and in constant flux due to the encounter, clash, and mixing of disparate relations between the colonizer and the colonized.”¹³⁷ Bhabha refers to this third space as fertile, becoming the soil where all cultural statements and systems take root.¹³⁸ This third space is also described as “epistemologically unstable and politically enigmatic” in the sense that it is not reducible to European enlightenment rules of rationality. As such, this space, characterized by its “instability”, liminality, and ambivalence, is not only “fertile” with potentiality, but it produces “the necessary imagination and impetus by which to critique the existing power structures and open up possibilities based on new methodologies and the mixing of identities.”¹³⁹

Lastly, Bhabha argued that hybridity is more interrogatory (asking the right questions and thus creating the space for new possibilities) than strategic, and this interrogatory nature was part of the performativity that was required in the on-going construction of Black folk religions.¹⁴⁰ Therefore, hybridity denotes that new meanings will emerge as new questions are asked in the context of changing times.

Third Space: Key Elements

Third space as Disruptive. Speaking of third space, Bhabha writes that it “constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no

¹³⁶ Baker, *Hybridity Church*, 25.

¹³⁷ Kato, *Diasporic Hybridity*, 26.

¹³⁸ Kato, *Diasporic Hybridity*, 26.

¹³⁹ Baker, *Hybridity Church*, 24.

¹⁴⁰ Baker, *Hybridity Church*, 24.

primordial unity or fixity.”¹⁴¹ In this space, he adds that symbols, signs, and even language “can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized, and read anew.”¹⁴² These acts of translation were not seen as benign, but revolutionary in the sense that it disrupted the colonists attempt to imprint an assigned identity.

Paul Meredith notes that at the “point at which the colonizer presents a normalizing, hegemonic practice, the hybrid strategy, encoded within a counter-hegemonic agency, opens up a third space of/for re-articulation of negotiation and meaning.”¹⁴³ Quite explicitly for Bhabha, these third spaces in between subject-positions were lauded as the “locale of the disruption and displacement of hegemonic colonial narratives of cultural structures and practices.”¹⁴⁴ He further adds that the activity of hybridity in these third spaces, housed the cutting edge of translation and negotiation.¹⁴⁵

Lastly, third space:

“...emerges through acts of negotiation and translation by which new hybridities emerge and existing hybridities are affirmed. It is also so that this process can only happen in the context of a third space which allows the freedom for this creative but disruptive process to take place.”¹⁴⁶

Bhabha even refers to hybridity as strategy of “camouflage”; offering hybridity as a heresy that can be subtly disruptive.¹⁴⁷ He speaks on how “newness” inescapably gets bounded

¹⁴¹ Bhabha, *The location of Culture*, 37.

¹⁴² Bhabha, *The location of Culture*, 37.

¹⁴³ Meredith, *Hybridity in the Third Space*, 3.

¹⁴⁴ Meredith, *Hybridity in the Third Space*, 2.

¹⁴⁵ Meredith, *Hybridity in the Third Space*, 2.

¹⁴⁶ Baker, *Hybridity Church*, 25.

¹⁴⁷ Hutnyk, Virinder, and Raminder, *Contact Zones*, 3.

up with a process of translating and transvaluing cultural differences.”¹⁴⁸ What appears to be mimicry of an “anterior pure” expression can camouflage the novel and protect its transformative potency. This work of hybridity is evident in the construction and performance of some Spirituals and even within some of the folk tales. The point is that the positioning of this third space allows for disruptive discourse that offers opportunities to resist destructive hegemonic norms and narratives and allows for the preservation and enunciation of new liberating identities.

Third Space as Liminal Possibilities. Related to hybridity and third space, liminality is often defined as a “ritual space or phase of transition” and as the, “in-between, the neither one thing nor the other.”¹⁴⁹ For this paper, I am more concerned about the liminality of third space in regard to space. Like Kelly Brown-Douglas definition of crossroads theology, the liminal for me is not just an “in-between and undefined space” but a place of unlimited possibility at the intersection where multiple identities converge.¹⁵⁰ Liminality then is a charged third space existing outside of established norms, where people of hybrid natures can create new and innovative ways to constitute new meaning.

Further, in his writings, Bhabha refers to a general ambivalence that permeates the third space where identity is negotiated.¹⁵¹ As such, third space, positioned in this ambivalence, represents a creative space; a palette of potentiality and possibility. For the purpose of this project, third space refers to not only the re-creative process of a constructive hybrid identity, but the actual physical spaces that were transformed from its ambivalence into spaces of divine

¹⁴⁸ Hutnyk, Virinder, and Raminder, *Contact Zones*, 2.

¹⁴⁹ Ian Buchanan, *A Dictionary of Critical Theory* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2010), 15.

¹⁵⁰ Kelly Brown Douglas, *Black Bodies and the Black Church: A Blues Slant* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 124.

¹⁵¹ Baker, *The Hybridity Church*, 25.

encounter. African Americans met in and transformed these spaces; materializing the latent possibilities of third space by surfacing tangible methods to creatively integrate and make meaning from their hybrid identities. These places of ritual performance became the spatial infrastructure of the Black folk religious practices that resisted against the psychological terrors of slavery and affirmed the inherent dignity of their humanity.

Third Space as “Communitas”. Third spaces allow for the expression of rituals of negotiation and enunciation. Within the freedom of these alternative spaces, where community is formed, “communitas” is also experienced. Communitas is defined as “the sense of sharing and intimacy that develops among persons who experience liminality as a group.”¹⁵² Victor Turner uses the term to express the “relational quality of full, unmediated communication and communion.”¹⁵³

Communitas emerges from these third spaces and its arrival is related to the generation of new “sacred accounts, symbols, rituals, philosophical systems, and works of art.”¹⁵⁴ Communitas is also associated with the collective feeling of joy and connection when a group becomes “tuned in to one another and live together through the same flow of experience.”¹⁵⁵ This space of expressive freedom that occurs with those who experience liminality, marginalization, and inferiority in society, signals that third space/hybridity is not just a individual exercise, but has implications for the development of a communal identity. More will be discussed about this

¹⁵² Edith Turner, “Communitas, Rites of,” in *Encyclopedia of Religious Rites, Rituals, and Festivals: Volume 6 of Religion & Society*, ed. Frank A Salamone (NY: Berkshire, 2004), 97.

¹⁵³ Turner, *Communitas*, 97.

¹⁵⁴ Turner, *Communitas*, 98.

¹⁵⁵ Turner, *Communitas*, 100.

process in the section about the creation of sacred space and the work of ritual theorists Catherine Bell and Randall Collins.

Third Space as Home. Lastly, the activity of “negotiation” and the reconstitution of new meaning in third spaces can be paired with bell hooks’ post-colonial notion of home. Christopher Baker writes of hooks’ understanding:

“Home” for [bell hooks] is no longer a precise geographical location, but a non-physical space, liberated from any constraints of spatiality or culture. It is the space of emotional and intellectual freedom in which she can feel empowered to be what she feels called to be; a new identity forged from various different aspects of her personal past, the history of her gender and African-American people, and also created by the opportunities of the present...”¹⁵⁶

Though, as we read further, actual geographical spaces were necessarily “seized” in order to safely facilitate a new sense of “home” through performance, bell hooks rightly identifies home as a type of third space that can be accessed and experienced by those longing for liberated agency and a life-affirming sense of place in the world.

Third Space and the Sacred in Black Folk Religion

“Us could go to de white folk’s church [in a segregated section], but us wanted to go whar us could sing all de way through, an hum ‘long, an’ shout—yo’ all know, jist turn loose lack”¹⁵⁷—
Ex slave Emily Dixon

Definition of Sacred

The experience of “third space” in the framework of Black folk religion was not just a matter of hybrid negotiations and enunciations, but it was intrinsically connected to ushering in and encountering the sacred. The activity of gathering freely and worshiping together charged the liminality of third spaces with sacred energy. Further, these activities demonstrated how the

¹⁵⁶ Baker, *Hybridity Church*, 19.

¹⁵⁷ Hopkins and Cummings, *Cut Loose Your Stammering Tongue*, 6.

fluid African notions of sacred and secular blurred distinctions. This tradition of “blurring” left a spiritual legacy of an increased capacity to affirm and even create the conditions where one could experience the presence and power of God in any place.

Traditionally defined, the sacred is a “religious” experience that refers to a” socially influenced perception of either some divine being, or some sense of ultimate reality or truth.¹⁵⁸ Emile Durkheim proposes that religious thought tends to categorize “into two classes, two opposite kinds...[the] profane and sacred.”¹⁵⁹ The sacred relates to encounters with a transcendent reality, and within Durkheimian conceptions, it refers to things being “set apart” from the ordinary to mark special meaning for a community.¹⁶⁰ Moving beyond this sense of “set apart”, Mircea Eliade suggest that “the sacred is conceived as being ontologically distinct from the profane.”¹⁶¹ Though this distinction exist, Eliade also posits that “profane space” can be consecrated and transformed into sacred space.¹⁶²

Some scholars like Susan White argue that the ideas of consecration, or the “setting apart” to denote or transform the profane into the sacred, has been historically limited. She further notes the problem of how “Christian theology of sacred space has not been very

¹⁵⁸ Matthew Evans, “The Sacred: Differentiating, Clarifying, and Extending Concepts” *Review of Religious Research* 45, no. 1 (2003): 32.

¹⁵⁹ Stephen Jacobs, “Virtually Sacred: The Performance of Asynchronous Cyber-Rituals in Online Spaces” *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 12, no. 3, 1 (April 2007): 1104.

¹⁶⁰ Evans, *The Sacred*, 33.

¹⁶¹ Jacobs, *Virtually Sacred*, 1105.

¹⁶² Jacobs, *Virtually Sacred*, 1105.

theological” and that “discussions almost completely turn into explications of the influence of theology on church architecture...[and] ecclesiastical buildings”¹⁶³

Lindsey Jones, however, encourages us to look beyond the architecture, and emphasizes that the activities happening in these spaces suggest that “we must understand sacred space as process and encounter, rather than simply place and structure.”¹⁶⁴ Stephen Jacobs concludes that this “raises the possibility that different forms of encounter might be regarded as instrumental in the construction of sacred space”. He uses this finding to underpin his article that addresses how virtual spaces can be made sacred through the performance of asynchronous cyber-rituals in online forums.¹⁶⁵

Documented historical evidence demonstrates how Black folk religious practices already resisted the rigid demarcations of sacred and profane, and that the created “third space” revealed multiple ways to understand and encounter the sacred: the sacred as permeable interface, the sacred as subversive, the sacred through ritual, and the sacred as performance.

Third Space as Sacred Experience in Black Folk Religion

Third Space: The Sacred as Permeable Interface. For slaves developing and practicing a distinct Black folk religion, I contend that third space was not only a psychological space set apart for the constructive work of hybridity, but it entailed actual geographical spaces that were transformed from ambivalent potentiality to performative places of sacred encounter. It was imperative to claim safe “third spaces” for African Americans to safely and freely gather, and the

¹⁶³Susan White, “The Theology of Sacred Space” in *The Sense of the Sacramental: movement and measure in art and music, place and time* (London: SPCK, 1995), 33.

¹⁶⁴ Jacobs, *Virtually Sacred*, 1105.

¹⁶⁵ Jacobs, *Virtually Sacred*, 1105.

process of converting these seemingly secular spaces into sites of sacred encounter was aided by the fluid African notions of sacred and secular.

The American propensity to compartmentalize the sacred, as defined by things “set apart” or as binary opposites of what was considered secular, was reinforced in architecture where the physical edifices of churches became seen as the exclusive realm of Godly encounter. In contrast, African notions of the sacred stemmed from a religious worldview that affirmed God’s presence as an “all-pervading spirit; present everywhere and is involved in the affairs of men.”¹⁶⁶ Because God was seen as the Creator of all, there was never a rigid demarcation between the “natural and supernatural, or the sacred and profane.”¹⁶⁷ The experience of the sacred was not confined to place. Therefore, it could be accessed at anytime and anywhere.

Whether in an abandoned tobacco barn, a slave cabin on the outskirts of the plantation, or a cleared piece of land in the woods, “third spaces” realized the African notion of the interchangeability of sacred and secular space. In other words, any space can be made sacred because God can be experienced in any place.

Third Space: The Sacred as Subversive. In many ways, the meetings in these spaces were a revolutionary act. Hopkins refers to this phenomenon as the “seizing of sacred domain.”¹⁶⁸ This verb of “seizing” is important to note, because the creations of these secret and sacred spaces were subversive acts undertaken as a matter of survival. Despite the dangers, these spaces were perceived as integral for resisting the corrosiveness of slavery and for the re-creation of the Black self. Henry Mitchell makes this observation:

¹⁶⁶ Hopkins, *Shoes*, 16.

¹⁶⁷ Wilmore, *Black Religion*, 37.

¹⁶⁸ Hopkins, *Down, Up, and Over*, 116.

“Black Religion, in its most pervasive form, was nothing less than an underground folk phenomenon, subversive and slivery, and supportive of Black survival. It used praise houses, brush arbors, and just hollow places and forest clearing, for its prayers, songs, ring shouts and fellowship....”¹⁶⁹

The subversiveness of “seizing sacred domain” occurred in many creative ways, and any space could be made sacred. For example, slaves would “slip down the hill” to steal a few moments devoted to “illegal” prayer. Ex-slave Andrew Moss speaks: “Us colored folks had praying grounds. My mammy’s was an old twisted thick-rooted muscadine bush.”¹⁷⁰ Others would simply lay down in the shallow spaces or holes in the fields. This created the irony that the same field which located the oppressive acts of slavery, could also be transformed into a place of sacred empowerment.

Most times, slaves had to set up meeting times during the aforementioned “Sundown to Sunup” moments. Hopkins describes it as such:

“At an appointed hour, African Americans sneaked off in the blackness of night to the woods. Some simply had “a good time talking about their mistress and master”; others assembled around a big fire on the edge of the woods “whar deir racket wouldn’t ‘sturb de white folks”; while others knelt and prayed with faces turned toward the ground to deaden the sound of their supplication and heartfelt longings...”¹⁷¹

What is of note is that this space was made sacred even though all the activities were not explicitly religious in nature. The act of coming together in the freedom of these hidden spaces allowed for the survival needs of African Americans to be met and facilitated the organic and varied ways that those needs were met.

¹⁶⁹ Henry H. Mitchell, *Black Belief: Folk Beliefs of Blacks in American and West Africa* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 104.

¹⁷⁰ Hopkins, *Shoes*, 19.

¹⁷¹ Hopkins, *Down, Up, and Over*, 137.

Bush Arbors/Hush Harbors. One of the ingenious developments in these secret spaces was the development of hush harbor gatherings. In many respects, it “epitomized black hands and hearts creating space for the poor to encounter the holy...”¹⁷² These crude structures were made from felled trees, brush, and branches. Sometimes slabs were brought in to make the seats. These structures were an embodiment of a courageous instinct to “seize sacred domains” and they risked everything to be able to worship free.

Ex-slave Mary Ferguson talked about these meetings:

“Meeting back there meant more than they do now. Then everybody’s heart was in tune...they would steal off in the fields and in the thickets and there, with heads together around a kettle to deaden the sound, they called on God out of heavy hearts...”¹⁷³

Gathering in these spaces were a subversive act that were a threat to the institution of slavery. As such, laws were passed that outlawed these unsupervised religious meetings, and slaves faced brutal whippings or even death if found.¹⁷⁴ To address these concerns, African Americans developed ways to not get caught included having lookouts who alerted the community of slave patrollers. Regardless, the protection of these meetings in these third spaces was paramount because the need of African Americans to “put their heads together” in order to “call on God”, was believed to be a risk that was worth taken.

Third Space: The Sacred as Ritual. One of the more curious rituals employed in these spaces to instill a sense of Divine protection was having an overturned metal pot in position to

¹⁷² Hopkins, *Down, Up, and Over*, 138.

¹⁷³ Wilmore, *Black Religion*, 137.

¹⁷⁴ Hopkins, *Shoes*, 19.

“catch the sound.”¹⁷⁵ This sound deadening technique is ubiquitous throughout many slave narratives about these secret meetings. The ritual entailed placing a pot or kettle by the door with the open mouth facing the people. Scholar, Henry Mitchell, notes how this ritual could relate to the preeminence of the pot in many African rituals, and he contends that its presence could signify spiritual significance of African origin.¹⁷⁶

Ex-slave Patsy Hyde explains, “De slaves would tek dere old iron cookin’ pots en turn dem upside down on the ground...Dey claimed dat hit showed dat Gawd wuz wid dem.”¹⁷⁷ Though the true origin of the tradition and meaning of the overturned pot may never be fully known, the fact that its conspicuous placement ushered in a sense of divine presence and protection seems to be consistent. This ritual, like the pouring of libations, “sanctified” these secret services, and was communally acknowledged as a prerequisite that gathered and legitimized the activity. Therefore, the experiences of liberation in these third spaces were not only the result of devotional intentionality or creative spiritual resilience, it was facilitated and anchored by certain recognizable rituals that signified sacred presence and activity.

Third Space: The Sacred as Performance. African ideas of the sacred, along with the acceptance of the ability of performance to sacralize space, enabled encounters with the divine that was not only expected but welcomed. Further, the notion of sacralizing liminal spaces was not confined to physical places, it also occurred within the performances of the folk practices itself. Hopkins speaks of “jubilant continuous testimony” accompanied by the form of an

¹⁷⁵ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 215.

¹⁷⁶ Mitchell, *Black Belief*, 34.

¹⁷⁷ Hopkins, *Down, Up, and Over*, 145.

embodied and ecstatic singing particular to black worshippers.”¹⁷⁸ Toni Morrison imaginatively illustrates this phenomenon in “The Clearing” scene in *Beloved*. In the clearing, after Baby Suggs completed her sermon, she:

“...stood up and then and danced with her twisted hip the rest of what her heart had to say while the others opened their mouths and gave her the music. Long notes held until the four-part harmony was perfect enough for their deeply loved flesh”¹⁷⁹

The effect of these performative religious experiences that located a sense of the transcendent in the body was transformational; temporarily suspending the slave’s lowly earthly state in order to identify with the divine.¹⁸⁰ More will be said about the content of these Black folk religious practices in the following chapter on bricolage. For now, it is important to note that the idea of third space was not confined to physical place but could entail a spiritual state of being that opened up in the midst of performance.

In my experience, spoken word communities create sacred space in the tradition of Black folk religious traditions. However, my engagement with the writings of ritual theorists provide me with the language and theoretical framework to make that comparison.

Sacred Space and Ritual Theory

Catherine Bell critiques the generally accepted definition of “ritual” performance as symbolic activity, or that which only expresses cultural patterns and communicates meanings and values. Instead, Bell proposes a more systematic framework for analyzing ritual as a form of cultural practice, and adds that it constructs particular types of meaning and values in specific

¹⁷⁸ Hopkins, *Down, Up, and Over*, 141.

¹⁷⁹ Morrison, *Beloved*, 89.

¹⁸⁰ Hopkins, *Down, Up, and Over*, 141.

ways as a vehicle of relationship building.¹⁸¹ Bell names this process, ritualization, and elaborates on her theory in the book, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*:

From the perspective of ritualization, the categories of sacred and profane appear in a different light. Ritualization appreciates how sacred and profane activities are differentiated in the performing of them, and thus how ritualization gives rise to (or creates) the sacred as such by virtue of its sheer differentiation from the profane. Whereas Durkheim defined religion and ritual as that which is addressed to the sacred, the approach presented here is an inverse of his, showing how a particular way of acting draws the type of flexible distinctions that yield notions and categories like ritual or religion¹⁸²

This notion of flexibility is furthered in Bell's writing as she describes how ritual agents can become actors of ritual mastery that embody "flexible sets of cultural schemes" and can "deploy them effectively in multiple situations so as to restructure those situations in practical ways."¹⁸³

This deploying of ritual agents is made effective in ritual interactions. In his book, *Interaction Ritual Chains*, Collins describes how rituals are successful if certain "ingredients" are present. These components include the bodily assembly of participants, barriers that demarcate insiders and outsiders, mutual attention between a performer and audience, and a shared mood.¹⁸⁴ The feedback loop created by the mutual attention and shared mood can feed into each other and build to the extent that it produces a strong collective emotion or what Durkheim described as "collective effervescence." Collins explains how this is "a feeling of

¹⁸¹ Catherine Bell, *Ritual Perspectives and Dimensions* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1997), 82.

¹⁸² Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory: Ritual Practice* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1992), 91.

¹⁸³ Bell, *Perspectives*, 81.

¹⁸⁴ Randall Collins, "The Micro-sociology of Religion: Religious Practices, Collective and Individual" (working paper, ARDA Guiding Paper Series, The Association of Religion Data Archives at The Pennsylvania State University, State College, PA, 2010), <http://www.thearda.com/rrh/papers/guidingpapers.asp>.

being brought out of oneself into something more powerful and larger.” This interaction produces membership feelings, emotional energy, and moral feelings. Further, this notion reinforces Victor Turner’s idea of “communities” as rituals bond a community in practice. Lastly, symbols are created, (or objects assigned new meaning) and made sacred by investing in them the power to represent the developing communal ethos, beliefs, and practices.¹⁸⁵

Spoken Word: Ritual and Sacred Third Space: An Analysis

Through the conceptional lens of liminality, sacred space, and ritual theory, I am now able to demonstrate how I have experienced spoken word communities express Black folk religious traditions by creating sacred space through ritual performance. It is easy to apply Collins’ theory of Interaction Ritual to what occurred in the Nuyorican Poets Café. It was clear that there was a gathered group of people in the café that was marked off by the brick walls of the building. As Faraji Salim performed his piece, the feedback loop between his performance and the response of the audience built up in such a way that an emotional response was elicited. This “collective effervescence” was evidenced by cheers, finger-snaps, hand claps, goosebumps, and sometimes tears. Faraji Salim was a ritual agent, and through his performance new meaning was made that bonded the audience in deep ways.

Through Faraji’s performance, a liminal space was created that was fertile and receptive to the subversive quality of his words. The effect of this performed ritual was the sacralization of objects. For example, the mic presided like the overturn pot in the slave cabin, signifying the presence of sacred activity. The poem itself, a critique to the consensus thought in the post 9/11 era, was disruptive and exemplified counter-hegemonic agency. For Black people who always

¹⁸⁵ Collins, *Micro-sociology of Religion: Religious Practice*, 2.

had to navigate the complexities of hybridity and notions of oneself vis-a-vis an antagonistic and violent American history, the performance of the poem enabled a third and sacred space that created a sense of belonging, “communitas”, and home.

In a more subtle manner, the house gathering at Cofi’s Brownstone also exhibited ways that sacred space was created by ritual performance in the tradition of Black folk religious practices. The feeling of safety and belonging was akin to the feeling of being in a hush harbor. Though the historical context was different, we can revisit the words of Mary Ferguson:

“...everybody’s heart was in tune...and there, with heads together around a kettle to deaden the sound, they called on God out of heavy hearts...”¹⁸⁶

The house gathering was a place where our collective “hearts were in tune” by the rituals that centered around spoken word. Even when sharing poetry, we were always certain to “cypher up”, or create a circle such that there was a continuous configuration of bodies that stood to hold the performance. This was done both in Cofi’s Brownstone and even in the streets; serving as a practice of “seizing of sacred domain.” Like those who “stole time” by subversively praying into shallow holes, the “cyphering up” could happen anywhere and actualized the African notions of “sacred permeability” as conveyed by a fellow poet and friend, “There is no spot where God is not.”

In my imagination, I can hear the hushed tones of Africans who had to gather around a sacralized pot, over which they whispered their prayers, hopes, and fears in moments of raw vulnerability. I can also remember how we gathered around the djembe drum in the center of Cofi’s living room, speaking free words of joys and pains. I thought of the “old twisted thick-

¹⁸⁶ Wilmore, *Black Religion*, 137.

rooted muscadine bush” that Andrew Moss’s enslaved mother used as her “praying grounds.” I also remember the ways we gathered around the large Oak tree in Bushnell Park, offering our poetry like prayers. Though the context was different, the mechanisms of ritual performance allowed us to tap into something lodged deep within our collective memories; the remembrance of how to create sacred space.

I thought of the way the night did not feel complete without a meal, and how in the sharing of food, there was a sense of emotional bonding and family. It was as if we were channeling the aunties and grandmothers who insisted that we eat whether we were hungry or not.

Through communal practices, spoken word created a third space where people from diverse backgrounds, cultures, and spiritualities were able to form a new enunciated reality from the clay of living liminality that awaited to be shaped. Spoken word associated practices engendered “communitas”, or a palpable sense of intimacy born from being tuned into the same flow of experiences. Cofi’s Brownstone became the site of a “third thing” that would have been difficult to experience within the confines and practices of one’s own exclusive religious communities. No one stopped being Christian, Rastafarian, Muslim, Kemetic, Buddhist, New Thought, or any of the labels assigned to those on the atheist and agnostic spectrum. However, in our coming together in Cofi’s Brownstone, we created a new context of “home”; a space in which we were able to encounter the “The Sacred”; a space of diverse belonging that not only fed the body but the soul.

Chapter 6

House 3: Bricolage and Postmodern Womanism

Vignette 3:

Red Bay Coffee Public Roastery
Fruitvale, Oakland CA 7:46pm¹⁸⁷

As I walked into the coffee shop, I could sense that something had energetically shifted. Though an ordinary glass door separated the freneticism of Oakland's streets on a Friday night, it felt more like a portal that ushered all who entered into a sense of something otherly, something spiritual. As I stood just beyond the threshold, the smell of fresh coffee mixed with the scent of the essential oil that perfumed the woman who greeted me. She smiled, and I became her reflection in that wordless exchange in a space that instantly makes siblings out of strangers. Home does that. Somewhere music was being played, Afrobeat.

I surveyed the mostly brown faces that beautifully contrasted or complimented the cornucopia of colors displayed on all manner of garments, from the pantsuit wearing professional woman, to the dashiki clad teenager. There were some African vendors, activists, seminarians, students, a few elders, and even some children. Behind the stage was a large wood paneled wall. The outline of Africa was cut into the wood. Placed in the continent-shaped void was a vertical garden filled with green plants. The vivified greenery of Africa that floated out from the dark planks was a striking sight, and regally presided over the space with authority. As the hour neared 8 pm, people sat or stood in bated anticipation. Sunni Patterson was about to perform.

¹⁸⁷ See Fig F.1-4 in Appendix F for pictures.

The poet's performance at Red Bay Coffee was part of a fundraiser for my friend and seminarian colleague. She is an interfaith minister and Ifa priestess who started a ministry called, *Blessed is She*. It is a "a global interfaith ministry formed out of a need for women to have a sacred space to love, affirm, and activate their power."¹⁸⁸ This night's proceeds went to assist women transitioning out of prison. More than just connecting women with the needed financial and social resources, my friend sought to provide holistic support by enabling their spiritual capacities to foster greater experiences of healing, wholeness, and empowerment.

As the program was about to begin, my friend went towards the middle of the room to offer an invocation. This included prayers of blessings for the event, Sunni, and her own ministry. People instinctually circled around her. She first began by offering salutations to Eshu, the Yoruba Orisha evoked at the start of ceremonies. She then honored the ancestors, and within the gathered circle, people offered verbal libations by speaking and acknowledging their own ancestors. After, the gathered group filled the air with a mixture of prayers from multiple traditions simultaneously. At the conclusion, my friend, whose ministry was just blessed, finished the prayer and the people responded with "ashe's"¹⁸⁹ and amens. She then called for the drummers to come....

Circled prayers, verbal libations, ancestral acknowledgments, and drumming were the ritual elements that set the stage for Sunni Patterson to offer her "big heart." She is a woman

¹⁸⁸ "About," *Blessed is She*, accessed January 1, 2020, <https://www.blessedis.org/about>.

¹⁸⁹ According to Will Coleman, the Yoruba word Ashe "is something like an all-pervasive spiritual energy. But it is also a term comparable to 'Amen.' It could be translated as 'so be it.' Ashe is the power that animates all of creation; it comes from the source of creation and is available to everything within the universe. Will Coleman, "Amen" and "Ashe": African American Protestant Worship and Its West African Ancestor" *Cross Currents*, (Summer 2002) accessed January 10, 2020, <https://www.questia.com/magazine/1G1-92285031/amen-and-ashe-african-american-protestant-worship>.

with a slight frame, but she commands the space like a megastar on an arena stage; like priest performing a Eucharistic liturgy in front of a large altar made of marble. Sunni is more than an entertainer and more than a poet. She is a preacher and a prophet sent to speak a word. And like her performance in New Orleans after Katrina, she moves to the stage like Baby Suggs mounting the large rock in “The Clearing.” Through her performance, the space will be made sacred by the ritual performance of her words that are steeped in the hybrid spirituality that characterizes the purest of Black folk religious traditions. She is a clear channel for Spirit, and something happens in her presence, something sacred.

After Sunni’s greeting and acknowledgments, she begins by speaking about the power of our words to shape our realities. She uses New Thought religious language to teach that we have to be responsible for the words we put out in the universe and for what we energetically activate in our lives. She recalls her grandmother’s folk wisdom and “motherwit” sayings like, “be careful to watch your words grow.” Sunni also quotes Proverbs 18:21, “Death and life *are* in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruit.” She explains that we must always be in the process of writing “Redemption Songs” with our lives, and explains in verse her justification for why and how we should write them:

...we write them by being grateful
just because the sun grows, and
just because the moon glows and
just because the grass grows,
we write them by writing and singing
and living by touching and praying by giving
and receiving by loving and affirming

by standing and knowing and feeling
and being faithful to this God
that we claim to believe in
and serve him in a manner that our
children might see
how we come from a line of kings and queens
of prophets and dreamers, diviners and speakers
and sayers of words who give life....¹⁹⁰

Bricolage: Definition and Overview

“Even as the gods of Africa gave way to the God of Christianity, the African heritage of singing, dancing, spirit possession, and magic continued to influence Afro-American spirituals, ring shouts, and folk beliefs. This was evidenced by the slaves’ ability not only to adapt to new contexts but to do so **creatively**.”¹⁹¹

Definition and uses. Bricolage refers to the “rearrangement and juxtaposition of previously unconnected signifying objects to produce new meanings in fresh contexts. It involves a process of re-signification by which culture signs with established meanings are reorganized into new codes of meaning.”¹⁹² Originally, bricolage was connected to the French term for tinkering, and speaks of a process of constructing or creating new things out of existing materials.¹⁹³ Bricolage is used in multiple contexts, including music, philosophy, architecture, literary criticism, and cultural criticism. It is also used to explain how subcultures are shaped in

¹⁹⁰ See Appendix F for the link to this “Untitled” poem by Sunni Patterson.

¹⁹¹ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 92.

¹⁹² Baker, *The Sage Dictionary of Cultural Studies*, 17.

¹⁹³ Elizabeth Hatton, *Levi-Strauss’s “Bricolage” and Theorizing Teachers’ Work* (New Jersey: Wiley, 2002), 74-75.

part by co-opting commodities that have certain cultural meanings and reusing them to create new and counter-cultural meanings as a form of revolt.¹⁹⁴

History. French anthropologist and ethnologist, Claude Levi-Strauss, was key in the development of bricolage. The concept was connected to the idea of a bricoleur who was a jack-of all trades, or handyman, who worked with what was at-hand to complete a task.¹⁹⁵ Unlike an engineer who, as a specialist, begins a task by asking what tools and materials are needed for its completion, a bricoleur first reviews the materials they have at hand and asks how they might be used to complete the task. Further, the means of the bricoleur are collected not with some particular use in mind, but in hope that they might turn out to be useful. Lastly, though the tools are determined by what's available, the bricoleur is unlimited in what they can create by rearranging those means to implement new meanings.¹⁹⁶

Relationship with Hybridity and Third space

Bricolage is connected to hybridity because hybridity out-pictures visibly, and the “terms of cultural engagement, whether antagonistic or affiliative, are produced performatively.”¹⁹⁷ New hybrid performances or enunciations usually borrow from multiple resources. This enables the process of incorporating, integrating, and transforming ideas from previously discreet sources. Further, because the creation and articulation of new cultural hybridities represent “a complex,

¹⁹⁴ Dick Hebdige, *Subculture the Meaning of Style* (London: Routledge, 2002).

¹⁹⁵ Hatton, *Bricolage*, 76.

¹⁹⁶ Hatton, *Bricolage*, 76.

¹⁹⁷ Benjamin Graves, *Homi K. Bhabha: The Liminal Negotiation of Cultural Difference* Political Discourse- Theories of Colonialism and Postcolonialism, accessed January 10, 2020, <http://www.postcolonialweb.org/poldiscourse/bhabha/bhabha2.html>.

on-going negotiation”,¹⁹⁸ bricolage is a useful framework to engage in this ever-evolving process that is constantly taking inventory and utilizing new cultural resources.

Third space, the context of hybrid production, is also connected to bricolage in that it “initiates new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration and contestation.”¹⁹⁹ Third space is not just a place or state of being, rather, it is an activity and “a way of describing a productive, and not merely reflective, space that engenders new possibility.”²⁰⁰ This bricolage production allows for the creativity necessary in re-signifying and reorganizing cultural symbols and ideas. Third space incubates the experimentation inherent in the nature of bricolage while becoming the “enunciative space of new forms of cultural meaning” that transgresses existing lines of cultural performativity.²⁰¹

Lastly, the experience of hybridity is connected to the ability to utilize bricolage in negotiating identity and creating new cultural forms and artifacts. As exemplified by the Jamaican-British theologian Robert Beckford, who sought to create a hybrid theology, I contend that hybrid identity contributes to an increased capacity to perform bricolage.

This is evidenced by the work of Betye Saar, the renowned Los Angeles based artist who expresses bricolage in the artistic forms of assemblage. This art, characterized by the collecting of discarded or recycled objects and reassembling them to create a new whole idea, perfectly signifies the process of reassigning new meaning with “whatever is at hand.” She is self-described as not only an artist, but a conjurer; a term that implicates the role of being a “root

¹⁹⁸ Graves, *Bhabha: The Liminal*, 1.

¹⁹⁹ Meredith, *Hybridity in the Third Space*, 3.

²⁰⁰ Meredith, *Hybridity in the Third Space*, 3.

²⁰¹ Meredith, *Hybridity in the Third Space*, 3.

worker” in Black folk religion traditions.²⁰² Of her process, she writes, “I am intrigued with combining the remnants of memories, fragments, relics and ordinary objects...” This “curiosity” contributes to “an inner spirit being released” that allows her to be “free to create.”²⁰³

Undoubtedly, Saar’s African American identity, informed by her African, Irish, and American Indian heritage, enhances her ability to not only excel in her works of assemblage, but to be a bricoleur, a conjurer, and an artist with the freedom to creatively express by manipulating meaning.

Bricolage in Black Folk Religion

Bricolage was a significant method for how African Americans constructed their Black folk religious traditions. This skill was developed because “the creative syncretism of the African mentality demanded that every new idea that worked in their hard circumstances be added to their religion.”²⁰⁴ This creative proclivity permitted the novel reinterpretations of white Christian resources. It also enhanced the adaptability performed in Black folk religious practices, or theological bricolage, resulting in the construction of new meaning by piecing together fragments from multiple sources. This work was not only a matter of bricolage, but imaginative theologizing, or the creative process of developing innovative theological language, ideas, and concepts for the purpose of meeting the immediate existential and material needs of Black people.

²⁰² Betye Saar, “Life is a Collage for Artist Betye Saar,” interview with Renee Montagne, Morning Edition, NPR (December 28, 2006), <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=6688207>.

²⁰³ “Saar Stuff,” *Betye Saar*, accessed January 9, 2020, <http://www.betyesaar.net/>.

²⁰⁴ Mitchell, *Black Belief*, 23.

Conjuring

Defining Conjuring. The practice of conjuring is important in the discussion of bricolage and the hybrid practices of Black folk religion. Conjure was a “system of magic, divination, and herbalism” within slave communities.²⁰⁵ It involved, “root workers”, or healing practitioners who understood the medicinal value of roots and herbs to aid illness, and it evoked a preexistent indigenous wisdom that was connected to the Earth. Beyond “root work”, conjure also referred to the general usage of objects such as charms, luck pieces, “mojos”, amulets, and other articles to ward off misfortune, evil, or sickness.²⁰⁶ Wilmore notes that the sometimes underground practices of conjure evolved out of the African medicine men among slaves who “attempted to direct [the] propitious, health-giving forces of nature.”²⁰⁷ Regardless of the reasons, conjure represented the acceptance of multiple ways to access the spirit world, and elements of those practices were wide spread among many of the slave communities in America.

Conjure’s Relationship with Christianity. Within the slave community, there continued to flourish a “rich tradition of folk belief and practice” which included conjure, herbalism, ghost lore, witchcraft and fortune telling.”²⁰⁸ The presence of conjuring did not replace the primacy of using Christian images and language to convey the folk values of the Black community. Rather, it existed alongside or at the margins of religious life. Though theoretically conjuring could be viewed as incompatible to Christianity, it was still present within Black communities. Many African Americans engaged it as a complementary practice because they generally did not dichotomize between the powers of good and evil. Raboteau sums up the relationship between Christianity and conjure by writing:

²⁰⁵ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 80.

²⁰⁶ Bridges, *Resurrection Song*, 64-65.

²⁰⁷ Wilmore, *Black Religion*, 40.

²⁰⁸ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 275.

“Conjure could, without contradiction, exist side by side with Christianity in the same individual and in the same community because, for the slaves, conjure answered purposes which Christianity did not, and Christianity answered purposes which conjure did not.”²⁰⁹

Professor of History, John Blassingame, notes that one of the purposes of conjure was to receive protection from physical violence. He writes, “faith in the conjurer was so strong that slaves often appealed to him to prevent floggings.”²¹⁰

The utilization of conjure, or root work, to avoid violence is documented in slave narratives including that of Fredrick Douglass. In his memoir, he conveys a story of how he ran into another slave named Sandy Jenkins while he was on the run from Covey, a “first rate overseer and negro-breaker.”²¹¹ Though Sandy counseled Douglass to return to the cruel slaver, this old adviser also brought Fredrick Douglass...

“...into another part of the woods, where there was a certain root, which, if I would take some of it with me, carrying it always on my right side, would render it impossible for Mr. Covey, or any other white man to whip me”²¹²

Douglass put the root in his pocket before returning back to the slave-breaker. Upon his return, “the virtue of the root was fully tested.”²¹³ Though Covey attempted to punish Douglass, Douglass successfully resisted and never again experienced a whipping in his life. Undoubtedly, there are explanations that can be given for why this was the case, but the reality of not being beat again would have reinforced the belief of the root’s efficacy and validated the usage of conjure as a “folk” religious practice.

²⁰⁹ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 288.

²¹⁰ Blassingame, *The Slave Community*, 110.

²¹¹ Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave* (Boston: Bedford/St.Martin’s, 1993), 79.

²¹² Douglass, *Narrative*, 78.

²¹³ Douglass, *Narrative*, 78.

The Conjurer as Communal Leader. Beyond offering their gifts in service to health or magic, the conjurer sometimes played leadership roles in the community. They were present or assisted in communal rituals, interpreted the meaning of events, and offered spiritual counsel and advice.²¹⁴ Though conjurers were not always effective, having their mix of charlatans and exploiting fakers, the measure of their authority in the community was always “directly proportional to belief in his power”, and whether or not their proscriptions worked.²¹⁵ Regardless, the presence of the conjurer in the life of the community signified that in Black folk religious practices, there was always the acceptance of the spiritual leadership of those who may not have been clergy, and performed outside the sanction or place of the institutional church.

Bricolage in Worship Settings

“Stealin’ the meeting, what enslaved religious blacks called the secret (reinterpreted) Christian gathering...the intricate dynamic of “stealing the meeting”—its types, content, and forms—located the syncretic or hybrid reality of African American religious experience”²¹⁶

“We used to steal off to de woods and have church, like de Spirit moved us—sing and pray to our own liking and soul satisfaction” Susan brooks.²¹⁷

One area that demonstrated the work of bricolage and a uniquely hybridized African American experience through Black folk religion was in the variety of worship styles. Though the language of Christianity was used, bricolage inevitably came into play because the slaves’ African heritage became the chief influencer of how slaves performed their religion.²¹⁸ Raboteau notes that though the “rhythms of the drum were by and large forbidden to the slave in the United States,” slaves adapted to that restriction by “handclapping, foot tapping, rhythmic

²¹⁴ Wilmore, *Black Religion*, 38.

²¹⁵ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 276.

²¹⁶ Hopkins, *Down, Up, and Over*, 135.

²¹⁷ Hopkins and Cummings, *Cut Loose Your Stammering Tongue*, 6.

²¹⁸ Wilmore, *Black Religion*, 48.

preaching, hyperventilation, antiphonal (call and response) singing, and dancing...”²¹⁹ The development of methods to make up for the absence of the drum, amply illustrates how slaves embodied the spirit of the “bricoleur”, using whatever was at hand to create a worship experience that was in integrity with their own hybrid identities.

The following section is a brief survey of some of the worship practices in Black folk religious traditions including the Spirituals, ring shout, and the chanted sermon.

The Spirituals

Background and Importance The Spirituals were a hybrid form a religious music from African Americans that drew from multiple sources including the Bible, Protestant hymns, folk song, and African styles of singing and dancing.”²²⁰ The importance of these songs was not lost to DuBois who said that they represent, “the articulate message of the slave to the world....the sifting of centuries.”²²¹ Howard Thurman, when speaking of the Spirituals, said that it was a “source of rich testimony concerning life and death, because in many ways they are the voice...of a people for whom the cup of suffering overflowed in haunting overtones of majesty, beauty, and power!”²²² Though there were many moods to the Spirituals ranging from sadness to jubilation, Fredrick Douglass remembered how the “dense old woods, for miles around, [would] reverberate with their wild songs, revealing at once the highest joy and the deepest sadness.”²²³ He continued to say that they would sing, “...words which to many would seem unmeaning

²¹⁹ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 65.

²²⁰ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 243.

²²¹ DuBois, *Souls*, 267.

²²² Howard Thurman and Anne Spencer Thurman, *For the Inward Journey: The Writing of Howard Thurman* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984), 201.

²²³ Douglass, *Narrative*, 46.

jargon, but which nevertheless were full of meaning to themselves.”²²⁴ The Spirituals were an example of an ingenious and uniquely African American production that became a vital religious expression of the community.

Protest and Resistance. The Spirituals were used for individual and collective uplift, but Douglass also writes how Spirituals were used as a tool of protest and resistance. He writes, “...every tone was a testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains.”²²⁵ Beyond offering the context for prayer or psychological catharsis, the Spirituals sometime signaled subversive actions. Consider the song, “Steal Away”:

Steal away, steal away,
Steal away to Jesus,
Steal away, steal away home,
I ain’t got long to stay here.

This song “employed a double meaning as communication code” to disguise their intentions.²²⁶ “Steal Away” could signify that there was a secret meeting, or the evocation of Jesus could mean that Harriet Tubman or other representatives of the underground railroad were leaving that night. It could signal preparations for armed struggle as was the case with Rev. Nat Turner, or it could have simply been sung as a song of prayer that soothed the soul of a community longing for freedom.²²⁷

Style. Beyond the content of the Spirituals, the singing style itself represented bricolage. This was evidenced by African influences that featured a strong emphasis on call and response,

²²⁴ Douglass, *Narrative*, 47.

²²⁵ Douglass, *Narrative*, 47.

²²⁶ Hopkins, *Shoes*, 30.

²²⁷ Hopkins, *Shoes*, 30.

polyrhythm, syncopation, ornamentation, slides from one note to another, and repetition.”²²⁸

Raboteau continues to say that the performance of these songs also included, “body movement, hand-clapping, foot-tapping, and heterophony.”²²⁹

Many white observers were perplexed by the unique hybrid expressions of these songs, and consistently labeled them as wild or strangely fascinating.”²³⁰ White compilers of Spirituals often expressed their frustration in trying to capture the sounds on page. One was quoted as saying, “Tones are frequently employed which we have no musical character to represent.”²³¹ As a show of creative ingenuity and musical bricolage, “African musical style and European hymnody met and became in the spiritual a new African-American song.”²³² Therefore, these Spirituals were not simply reducible to notes in a strict European way, as they conveyed a type of musicality that reflected an innovation of African forms.

The Spirituals were communal songs that helped shape a sense of shared identity while also creating an avenue for expressing and coping with shared experiences. As the songs were sung, a liminal third space opened within the structure of the song, allowing for a dynamic interplay between the individual and the collective group. The “flexible, improvisational structure of the Spirituals gave them the capacity to fit an individual’s specific experience into the consciousness of the group.”²³³ Within the repetitions of the call and response chords, an individual could extemporaneously give voice to their experiences and allow it to become “held” by the collective in a show of communal solidarity and support. (This is very similar to my

²²⁸ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 74.

²²⁹ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 74.

²³⁰ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 74.

²³¹ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 74.

²³² Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 74.

²³³ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 246.

explanation of a poetry cypher in a previous chapter.) Because of its multiple functions, the Spirituals were described as the “soul of communal worship.”²³⁴ As such, the Spirituals remain one of the most recognizable, revered, and utilized legacies inherited from Black folk religious traditions.

The Ring Shout

Definition. Though the ring shout is now mostly identified with the Sea Island people, or the Gullah people, of South Carolina, there is evidence that this tradition was widespread among multiple slave communities.²³⁵ The ring shout was a type a dance characterized by a “circular movement, shuffling steps and stamping, postures and gestures,” and the singing of call and response Spirituals lead by a song leader.²³⁶ The famous imaginative representation of this performance ritual in Morrison’s, *Beloved* led to, in part, this autoethnographic project.

This ritual embodied an African American idea of the sacred being ushered in through the context of performance. It was not enough to simply speak or sing the words; it had to be made alive. In fact, the ring shout was often called a “running spiritual.”²³⁷ The style of the ritual was strongly African influenced even though the “names and words of the African God were replaced by Biblical figures and Christian imagery.”²³⁸ This expression of hybridity resulted in the Spirituals not only being sung, but “shouted—that is, danced in the ring shout.”²³⁹ The lyrics of

²³⁴ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 265.

²³⁵ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 68.

²³⁶ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 71.

²³⁷ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 67.

²³⁸ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 74.

²³⁹ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 245.

the songs were acted out or dramatized by a band of shouters”, and represented how much embodied performances ushered in a sense of the sacred.²⁴⁰

Description. The shout began when a leader would call out the verse of a Spiritual. The shouters responded by walking counter-clockwise in a circle. Some singers remained outside the circle to maintain the song, while the shouters began shuffling to the “hand clapping and foot tapping of the chorus of singers.”²⁴¹ In many ways, the percussive aspect of the singing and stamping represented a mimetic manifestation of the African drums that, though vital in African ritualistic imagination, remained banned in America.

The ring shout would last throughout the night, creating a communally embodied transcendent experience through the music and the movements of their bodies. This performance created a sacred experience. Raboteau writes, “As the community of Christian slaves shuffled around the ring of the shout, they literally embodied a vision of heaven and their own presence there.”²⁴² Below is an example of a song that would have been sung in the ring shout:

(Chorus)	O shout, O shout, O shout away, and don't you mind, And glory, glory, glory in my soul!
(Verse)	And when 'twas night I thought 'twas day, I thought I'd pray my soul a-way, And glory, glory; glory in my soul! ²⁴³

The glory that was sung about was realized within the performance of the ring shout; offering a visceral sense of hope in the midst of incredible oppression.

²⁴⁰ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 245.

²⁴¹ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 245.

²⁴² Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 263.

²⁴³ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 245.

Relationship with the Institutional Church. The practice of the ring shout often came in conflict with the institutional church. There is an account of AME Bishop, Daniel Alexander Payne, breaking up a shout that developed at the close of the formal service as was the custom. He describes, “After the sermon they formed a ring, and with coats off, sung, clapped their hands and stamped their feet in the most ridiculous way.”²⁴⁴ Though it took some time, Payne demanded that the ring shout stopped and later asked the local pastor why the ritual took place. The pastor, or band leader, explained that the “Spirit of God works upon people in different ways” and communicated that the ring shout was necessary for, “conversion and the working of the spirit”²⁴⁵

There continued to be some tensions, but many times, African Americans found ways for the practice to co-exist even in the context of institutional spaces. Like conjuring, the ring shout met spiritual needs that the Protestant styles of worship was unable to meet. Slaves saw little contradiction in seeking out “the working of the spirit” however the form or ritual. Because of this, the ring shout remains one of the more remarkable examples of creative bricolage in Black folk religion traditions.

The Black Preacher and The Chanted Sermon

Overview/Description. The Black preacher was one the most important figures in the Black community and a pillar in African American religious imagination and experience. DuBois states, “The Preacher is the most unique personality developed by the Negro on American soil.”²⁴⁶ This uniqueness stemmed from the way some ministers addressed the spiritual

²⁴⁴ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 68.

²⁴⁵ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 69.

²⁴⁶ DuBois, *Souls*, 211.

needs of the community and the political conditions that affected their bodies. Historian and professor Manning Marable notes that, “the antebellum Black ministers were the living embodiments of the Spirit” and that in many ways, the preacher became a “charismatic representative of the living God” primarily through his oratorical gifts.²⁴⁷ The preacher was considered the “instrument of God’s breath”, and the preaching moment testified to not only his channeling of Spirit, but his own “ecstatic experience of preaching.”²⁴⁸

Primacy of Orality. The sermon was the main vehicle that the preacher used to unite the congregation in spirit while enacting their role to be mediators of the experience of God in the community. Marable again writes, “The Black minister’s primary responsibility was not to interpret the Spirit, but to conjure forth the passion, the explosive enthusiasm of realizing the Spirit within each member of the congregation.”²⁴⁹ The sermons that emerged from these moments were often improvisational art, but the power was in how the “performance joined the preacher, the congregation and the Spirit.”²⁵⁰

The Black preacher was also exalted in the community because of their ability to master “the vivid phrase, folk poetry, and picturesque words.”²⁵¹ Oral traditions have always been the primary vehicle of Black culture.²⁵² Therefore, verbal skills were valued highly in the slave communities, and the sermon privileged orality instead of the literary in accordance with Black cultural norms. Though it was obvious that the preacher prepared in advance, ultimately the style

²⁴⁷ Gayraud Wilmore, *African American Religious Studies: An Interdisciplinary Anthology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1989), 325.

²⁴⁸ Albert J. Raboteau, *A Fire in the Bones: Reflections on African-American Religious History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 146.

²⁴⁹ Wilmore, *Anthology*, 326.

²⁵⁰ Wilmore, *Anthology*, 326.

²⁵¹ Blassingame, *The Slave Community*, 131.

²⁵² Raboteau, *Fire*, 141.

of delivery determined the success of the oral performer and the word as performed becomes primary to the experience of the Spirit.

Preaching Style. Raboteau speaks of the Black preaching style of this time as “folk” because it was a “creation of popular rather than elite culture.”²⁵³ Raboteau used the term chanted sermon to refer to, “the metrical, tonal, rhythmic chant”²⁵⁴ with which the preacher structured their folk sermons. It usually involved starting calmly, rising, apex, then a return to the calm.²⁵⁵ Conceived in Black folk traditions, the style and experience of these sermons still exists today and is recognizable as a distinct form that survives in both religious and popular cultural imaginations.

Like most elements of Black folk religion, there was an expectation of communal participation, and the real-time responses in the preaching performance highlighted the “reciprocal relation between preacher and congregation.”²⁵⁶ In many ways, through call and response, verbal affirmations, and other verbal and nonverbal cues, the congregation creatively participated with the preacher in the composition and experience of the sermon.²⁵⁷ Preaching was situated in the context of community, and participation not only enhanced the preacher’s performance, but was also seen as the evidence of effectual ministry.

Black Women and Itinerant Preaching. Beyond what occurred in the “church house”, Black itinerant preaching, or evangelists, within revival settings in the late 18th through 19th century, created spaces for African American women to extend vocal leadership in ways that was

²⁵³ Raboteau, *Fire*, 141.

²⁵⁴ Raboteau, *Fire*, 141.

²⁵⁵ Raboteau, *Fire*, 145.

²⁵⁶ Raboteau, *Fire*, 145.

²⁵⁷ Raboteau, *Fire*, 145.

prohibitive in other religious spaces. Notable figures in this movement included, Jarena Lee, Zilphia Elaw, and Julia Foote.²⁵⁸ This style of preaching was characterized by conversion narratives and allowed for women to take ownership of their religious autobiography through story. Winfried Herget notes that, “What made itinerant preaching so appealing was its highly emotionalized and personalized rhetoric.”²⁵⁹ Much like Raboteau’s explanation of the chanted sermon, Herget continues to say that these itinerant preaching performances “depended first of all on the immediacy of the oral performance and the physical presence of both the preachers and audience in an emotionally charged rhetorical situation.”²⁶⁰ Within Black folk religious traditions, effectual preaching opened possibilities for marginalized voices to “speak the word” and be validated by their gifts of oral proficiency.

The performance of the sermon was birthed and delivered in a particular context that allowed for a unique spiritual epistemology. Raboteau writes that the sermon was a “product of a religious imagination in which experience is primary and is so because it validates religious truth.”²⁶¹ In short, the spoken word allowed a democratization of power because the, “...preacher’s authority did not rest on the authorization by an institution” but on claims of having “a direct call from God and its reconfirmation in each act of effectual preaching.”²⁶² This legacy of having spiritual authority legitimized by the power of effectual preaching or the gift of orality, continues today in both formal religious settings, and in informal space like where spoken word communities practice.

²⁵⁸ Winfried Herget, *Religion in African American Culture* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2006), 45.

²⁵⁹ Herget, *Religion*, 45.

²⁶⁰ Herget, *Religion*, 45.

²⁶¹ Raboteau, *Fire*, 151.

²⁶² Herget, *Religion*, 45.

In my experience, spoken word communities produce a bricolage of theological enunciations in the tradition of Black folk religious traditions. My engagement with the writings of the womanist theologian, Monica Coleman, will provide me with the needed language and theoretical framework to make that comparison.

Monica Coleman and Postmodern Womanism

Monica Coleman's postmodern womanism, as explicated in her book, *Making A Way Out of No Way*, provides a theological framework that serves as a key interpretive lens for how the concept of bricolage and sacred space, as manifested in black folk religious practices, connect to the creative practices in spoken word communities.

In general, womanist theology refers to theologies that “maintain an unflinching commitment to reflect on the social, cultural, and religious experiences of Black women”, and are ultimately grounded in and accountable to the religious reality of Black women's lives.”²⁶³ Coleman explains how this theology enables a weaving together of the past, future, and the infinite possibilities offered by God into a communal project of salvation that leads to the survival and liberation for black woman.²⁶⁴

Drawing on the contributions of first and second wave womanism, Coleman's postmodern womanist theology affirms the notion that “salvation is found in the activity of communities” who are “creatively transforming the world through the acts of teaching and

²⁶³ Monica A. Coleman, *Making A Way Out of No Way: A Womanist Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008), 11.

²⁶⁴ Coleman, *Making a Way*, 101.

healing.”²⁶⁵ It is also a theology that “believes that the past is a critical dimension” and acknowledges the “ancestors’ constructive role in the process of salvation.”²⁶⁶

Relevant to Coleman’s postmodern womanist theology is its challenge to the Christian hegemony present in the early framing of womanism discourses. Noting the “multiple cultural and religious influences that constitute African American religion”, she acknowledges and “recognizes that Black religion has also been a syncretic movement.”²⁶⁷

This historical hybrid project of syncretized religious practices in Black folk religious practices have survived as the idea of multi-religious belonging. In Coleman’s article, “The Womb Circle: A Womanist Practice of Multi-Religious Belonging”, she describes her experience with a program designed by Queen Afua, who is a nutritionist, herbalist, yoga instructor, and a priestess of the Kemetic faith.²⁶⁸ Coleman writes how she was a part of diverse circle of Black women from diverse religious backgrounds who participated in healing practices designed to bring wholeness to women.

Coleman describes how the Womb Circle disclosed how within the larger African American religious tradition, “there are individuals—indeed entire communities—that live and function as members of multiple religious tradition simultaneously.”²⁶⁹ This is a legacy of the religious lives of the slave community that have been multi-religious as they created a hybrid religious expression that combined Christianity and forms of African derived religions.

²⁶⁵ Coleman, *Making a Way*, 100.

²⁶⁶ Coleman, *Making a Way*, 122.

²⁶⁷ Coleman, *Making a Way*, 39.

²⁶⁸ Monica A. Coleman, “The Womb Circle: A Womanist Practice of Multi-Religious Belonging” *Practical Matters* (2011): 3.

²⁶⁹ Coleman, *The Womb Circle*, 7.

Tracy E. Hucks, in her essay, “Burning with a Flame in America”, discusses “insight into the complex world of dual religious allegiance as it relates to African American women’s participation in African-derived religions and Christianity.”²⁷⁰ Coleman summarizes one of Hucks findings by saying that “African derived traditions within slave religion were less about doctrines and ritual than they were about a means to healing and empowerment.”²⁷¹ Coleman notes that there is a functional or pragmatic character to multi-religious belonging that is derived from the history of Black folk religious traditions.²⁷²

This reality is evidenced in the opening chapter of Coleman’s book that documents her interaction with “Maria” at a West African dance class. The class was in celebration of Oya, the Yoruba Orisha (or aspect/face of the High God) of transformation and change that is symbolized by fierce winds or storms.²⁷³ Though most of the participants were not practicing members of the Ifa community, “Maria” expressed her reason for joining the religiously-based dance session, “I don’t know how this works, but it makes me feel whole.”²⁷⁴ This “functional theology” undergirds the type of religious practices that enable creative and expressive acts of salvation that lead to greater wholeness and flourishing.

Both Coleman and Hucks note how the author and speaker, Iyanla Vanzant, demonstrates leadership from a context of “multi-religious belonging” and is able to “replace rigid

²⁷⁰ Tracey E. Hucks, “Burning with a Flame in America: African American Women in African-Derived Traditions” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 17, no. 2 (2001): 94, www.jstor.org/stable/25002413.

²⁷¹ Coleman, *The Womb Circle*, 8.

²⁷² Coleman, *The Womb Circle*, 9.

²⁷³ Judith Gleason, “Oya in the Company of Saints,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 68, no. 2 (2000): 265-91, www.jstor.org/stable/1465923.

²⁷⁴ Coleman, *Making a Way*, 5.

demarcations of religion with broader, more embracing appeals to a universal spirituality.”²⁷⁵

Vanzant’s ministry, which combines spiritual wisdom from Christian, Yoruba, Indigenous American, and New Thought traditions, have been praised for its transformative power, and she has a large following among a variety of Black women, including many who self-identity as Christian.

Spoken Word: Bricolage and Postmodern Womanism: An Analysis

Like Iyanla Vanzant, Sunni Patterson operates as a spiritual leader who uses the production and enunciation of imaginative theologies (the creative synthesis of multiple religious traditions) to create sacred spaces of performance. Her work/ministry is validated by how effective it is in the lives of people, and her leadership is affirmed even by those who practice different religious traditions. The bricolage content and performance of Sunni’s work is rooted in the hybridity of Black folk religious traditions and expresses a commitment to what Coleman described as a functional theology. Simply, this means that her work is validated by whether “it works” and is a theological project whose *raison d’etre* is in providing resources to resist and flourish as a creative response to the unique spiritual needs surfaced within the Black experience. Because spoken word is described as a “powerful form of cultural production that allows for the creation and expression of alternative and multiple knowledges,”²⁷⁶ it presents as the perfect artform to midwife the poetic sermons birthed from Sunni Patterson’s theological creativity.

²⁷⁵ Hucks, *Flame*, 101.

²⁷⁶ Erica Granados de la Rosa, *Up Next: The Epistemic Power of Spoken Word Poetry* (Denton, TX: Texas Woman’s University Press, 2013), 1.

Throughout Sunni's performance in the Red Bay Coffee spot, her poetry brought healing and empowerment. This was present not only in her words, but in her ability to create opportunities for people to participate in their own process of healing. She employed the familiar cultural ritual of "call and response", and like the Spirituals, her poetic constructs created a "third space" for people to name both their pains and hopes. There was a "no-time", and "beyond-time", in the sacred space created by her spoken word, mirroring the ring shout traditions that could stretch on for hours into the night. That night, I noted in my notebook how she enabled an "encounter with the transcendent that makes 5 hours feel like a minute, and a 5-minute poem feel like a lifetime."

Sunni stood in the authority of Black folk religious traditions that reveres the "Black preacher"; one who is able to be a "channel for the Spirit" by their oratorical gifts. With a sense of assurance of her communal role to mediate the presencing of the Spirit as a "charismatic representative" of God, she began a new poem,²⁷⁷

We have not always found comfort in killers.
We have not always found solace being rocked in the bosoms
Of those that silently pray and openly destroy,
No, not always have we mistaken mimicry for mastery
or pretending for knowing, or enslavement for freedom.
But across my memory marches millions.
Bold, regal, resilient, confident.
Unshackled spirit stumping up sprints to guide us through
this fickle material world.

²⁷⁷ See Appendix F for the link to the poem, *We Have not Always found Comfort in Killers*, by Sunni Patterson.

We, like sun and moon folk, praying our prayers
singing our songs: Eshu, Ogun, Shango, Yemaja
Oshun, Obatala, Amballah Ayida Wedo, Loa, Nkongo
Oladumare, Nyami
We know all of you by name.
We are people of beginnings
of culture, of strength...

From the opening lines, Sunni's poem demonstrated a deep connection to the hybrid nature of Black folk religious traditions. With prophetic power, she resisted an identity informed by taking "comfort in killers", or one that finds solace "in the bosom of those that silently pray and openly destroy." Through her poem, and by means of her imaginative memory, she engages in the re-creative act of enunciating an alternative identity rooted in African religion and culture. The enunciating act is prefaced by multiple proclamations of "We", connecting to the African notion that affirms one's identity and meaning in community. She connects "we" to nature, and to African deities. "We are people of beginnings, of culture, of strength."

Later in the poem, she says,

...Not always have we forgotten
how to conjure up spirits.
Ancestor wisdom, fix up a mixture.
Spiritual elixir.
Ancient traditions.
We, like magicians, god-like vision....

In this section of the poem, Sunni explicitly seeks to connect the hearers to the legacy of conjuring. In doing so, she verbally relocates the congregation to those alternative and

sometimes “out of the way places” that conjurers offered the community their practice. Sunni gives license for one to pursue the place of healing, wherever or however it may come. Not only does she signify to these Black folk religious practices, but she “preaches” how each one has the ability to connect to those ancestral led mixtures of “spiritual elixirs”, and how this allows us to transform our realities like magicians. As a performer, she stands in the place of the conjure-leader, offering medicine in the form of her skillfully composed poems. She finishes,

...Hughes said life for us ain't been no crystal stair
but at least the stairs are there to push us up higher,
teach us to go beyond the destroyer's disguises,
look 'em in the eye and be able to see
'cause what's so surprising when you know the
Nature of a beast—especially
when they've shown the same face for centuries

I recall within a speech Dr. King made us aware
He said injustice anywhere is injustice everywhere
So they can spare us that drama, huh?
We got the heart of those field working mamas.
We carry the torch of that ancestor fire.
So that with every fiber—that flutters in our being,
and with every finding that comes from our seeking.
With every hearing that comes from our listening,
and every sight that comes from our seeing,
let us be,
Faithful, strategic, and free.²⁷⁸

²⁷⁸ Sunni Patterson, *We Have not Always Found Comfort in Killers*, accessed January 23, 2020, <https://genius.com/Sunni-patterson-untitled-annotated>.

Drawing on the literary influences of Langston Hughes, and the words of the Christian leader, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Sunni sought to negate the destructive acts of the “destroyers” by tapping into the “heart of the field working mamas.” This is a direct reference to African American ancestors and the Black folk religion that they developed. Her poem displays this bricolage that interacts with Coleman’s womanist theology that privileges the presence of the ancestors in the act of communal salvation. “We carry the torch of our ancestor’s fire.” The poem concludes with an exhortation to a collective vision that is grounded in the past, (faithful), directional towards future acts (strategic), and characterized by the experience of liberation (free).

Near the end of the performance of this poem, I turned and saw a Black man about my age wiping tears. Something happened, something spiritual. Sunni Patterson stands in the literary tradition of Sonia Sanchez, the intellectual tradition of bell hooks, and the *theo-performative* tradition of women preachers like Jarena Lee, Zilphia Elaw, and Julia Foote. The skilled orality and charisma that informed her ritual performance allowed for a mutual exchange of energy between her and the audience. This exchanged built up and intensified in such a way that there was what Randall Collins describes in his Interactive Ritual theory, an “emotional bond” that resulted in what Durkheim coined as “collective effervescence.” Black folk religious traditions have another term for it, the Spirit. That night, as she stood as the “instrument of God’s breath”, she created the space for the work of the Spirit, a work that blurred the lines between sacred and secular, a work that “just works”, and a work that results in applause, goosebumps, amens, and even some tears.

The way Sunni performs as a preacher discloses her imaginative theological constructs that out-pictures both in content and style. In her poem, “My Mama House is the River”²⁷⁹, she offers salutations and praises to Oshun, the Yoruba Orisha of creativity, love, and music among other things. Oshun’s symbols include gold, sweet water like rivers, fans, and other objects. She begins by chanting a traditional Yoruba salutation and greeting to Oshun, then starts her verse:

my mother's house is a river
I am lured to her door and immediately I am humbled
it is here she administers her cool water cure
abundantly pure I see my face in hers
clearly my mother is a river and when I
am real still and quiet she shows me her secrets
my mother the diviner

She goes on to talk about drawing strength from examples in history, and how the spirit of her “Mama” sustained women through unspeakable hardships. Embodying the griot and folklorist, she recounts the histories of “women chained and bound in Zanzibar”, and the revolutionary and heroic acts of “St.” Anastacia of Brazil. She extols her miracle-working “Mama” and concludes her Psalm-like poem of praise:

.... she comes to serve
you her love on a platter, eat up there
is plenty more where that came from
she is the generous one

²⁷⁹ See Appendix F for a link to the poem, *My Mama House is the River*, by Sunni Patterson.

will prepare a table before me
in the presence of mine enemies
surely goodness and mercy shall follow...

...I am humbled and honored
to be in such a holy space
I place you high mama glad that I one
of your daughters
you anoint my head with your waters
and my cup runneth over
and before you know it, I am back at your door
to offer a salute and give you
thanks once more.²⁸⁰

Sunni channels the art of Betty Sayre as she expresses the bricolage of her imaginative theologies; skillfully joining Yoruba imagery and chants with verses from the 23rd Psalm in the Bible. This poem, representative of many her works, reveals the way she re-signifies and reconfigures religious and cultural ideas in order to enunciate a “third thing” in a sacralized “third space” for our collective edification. She is the conjure-leader who places the needed root-herb in our souls like a rock in young Frederick Douglass’ pockets, surfacing an activation of God’s presence in our lives that we did not even know we needed.

She also demonstrates bricolage in how she performs. She delivered her poem in the style that Raboteau coined as a “chanted sermon.” This referred to the “the metrical, tonal, [and]

²⁸⁰ Sunni Patterson, *My Mama House is the River*, Printed with Permission of the Author.

rhythmic chant”²⁸¹ that characterized the preaching style born from Black folk religious traditions and perfected in Black Church settings. Even though she was not speaking on explicitly Christian themes, Sunni elicited the same response that one would receive from a congregation when fully engaged with an effective Christian preacher. Further, her poem can be described as an inverted Spiritual in form. Whereby traditional Spirituals combine Christian themes with African performance styles, Sunni’s “Spiritual” combined African religious themes with performance styles associated with the folk practices of the Christian Black Church.

In many ways, Sunni Patterson’s performance/ministry exemplifies all the elements of how spoken word expresses as a Black folk religious tradition. She transformed the Red Bay Coffee Public Roastery into a sacred place of diverse belonging, outside of conventional religious institutions, that enabled one to confront some of the challenges facing Black communities. Sunni’s spiritual leadership was validated, not by the sanctions of denominational ordination, but by her demonstrated ability to facilitate the “working of the Spirit.” She expressed a ministry that out-pictured as a poetic performance of bricolage that elicited a response that approximates the experience one would have in church.

Beyond Sunni Patterson, displays of imaginative theologies were present in the other stories that I carried with me through the “three” houses. For instance, when Faraji Salim first stepped on the stage to perform at the Nuyorican that night, his set including various poems that ranged from the prophetic piece entitled, “Star Spangled Banner”, to more entertaining and irreverent poems about relationships. Still, the first words that came out of his mouth upon walking on the stage was a chant he sung with familiar words:

²⁸¹ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 141.

“May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart, be acceptable in your sight, my Lord, my Rock, and my Redeemer.”

This quote from Psalm 19:14 is generally used by preachers before delivering a sermon. It signified to both Faraji and the audience that the space was being consecrated for and by the sacred activity of his spoken word. His bricolage performance created opportunities for personal and communal transformation despite the mixture of themes, topics, and content resourcing, religious or otherwise. Somehow, it just worked, and that was enough.

This form of bricolage and imaginative theologies was also present in the house gathering at Cofi’s Brownstone. Something sacred occurred in the space that allowed me to utter Christian verses from the Bible over the Nyabinghi rhythms being played on the djembe drum. This almost trance-setting rhythm is usually played during Rastafarian chanting sessions. Something sacred occurred, when at that same gathering that extending into the dawn, my Muslim friend, Tariq, invited me to perform morning prayers from his Islamic tradition. Upon leaving, I did sun-salutation yoga poses with a friend who was a dancer. Her art was movement, and her body was the spiritual instrument of divine encounter.

Something sacred happened in the “third space” of Cofi’s Brownstone that allowed for the performance of a variety of rituals informed by multiple traditions. This spiritual bricolage, performed as a diverse community gathered around the art of spoken word poetry, was not an eclectic clashing of religion and culture. Instead, it facilitated the subtle creation, enunciation, and inhabitation of something new.

It is likely that conventional religious spaces would have been unreceptive, or unable to accommodate this type of counter orthodox *theo-praxis*, however, something transformative was birthed by our spoken word community, and somehow, it worked.

These examples of poetry-infused products of hybridity, empowered by the living waters of Black folk religious traditions, defies strict categorizations or the Western proclivity of systematization. Rather it is discerned through the epistemology of visceral experiences, made sacred through performance, and validated by its effectiveness to foster resistance and flourishing. This phenomenon is new wine, and this project has been an attempt to create an approximation of a new theoretical wineskin that begins to extend some understanding of this activity on its own terms.

Chapter 7

The Epilogue

Vignette 4

**St. Marks United Methodist Church
My Office. Sacramento CA: 2:25am**

I sat in my office at the church at 2:25 in the morning, writing. This was one of those nights near the end of the writing process when I was singularly focused; entering the depths of a beyond-time abyss in which I had to attempt to write myself towards the surface to catch a breath. It was one of those times when it was hard to remember when I was not writing.

Since no one was on the church campus at that hour, I decided to light a sandalwood incense and sit in the chair opposite my desk. It was time to just hit pause. I turned on Miles Davis' Flamenco Sketches and began to reflect on my autoethnographic journey that started as an epiphany while watching YouTube. I was grateful to engage these stories of my experiences in spoken word communities that, though living in me in a profound way, I would not have been able to access as deeply in the absence of the rigor of this doctoral process.

I was grateful for my ancestors, and the spiritual genius that survived in the form of Black folk religious traditions. I was grateful that these traditions continue to live through spoken word communities. I was grateful for my Auntie and memories of testimony time. I was grateful that spoken word communities became the new vessel into which I was able to pour the new wine of my evolving spirituality. I was grateful for my time at the *River*, where God spoke to me through *Her* waters and assured me that I will always be guided even though I left the church. And I remain grateful for Oshun.

As a senior pastor, whose job it is to preach every Sunday as a spiritual leader, I reflected on my time in the sacred spaces created by the ritual performances of spoken word. Those experiences were just as formative as my years in seminary. In the sacred spaces of poetry spots, I reconnected to my sense of vocation, and my calling to minister through “the word.”

Further, I was able to recognize that I was not alone. I was one among the many preachers and prophets who spoke in the “churches” of poetry spots. I was one of many drawn to the new pulpits consecrated by the single mic on a lone stage and by the offering of their own “big hearts.”²⁸² This sense of call followed me into multiple and sometimes unlikely places. I followed the call when it led me to the makeshift “Clearings” of bars and clubs. I performed with karaoke microphones over the incessant clinks and clamors of drinking patrons. I followed that same call when it led me to bigger venues, like when I performed on the famous stage of the Apollo Theater in Harlem, NY.

I thought of the audacity of it all when I noticed two things: how beautiful Bill Evans plays the piano all throughout the album, *Kind of Blue*, and that I had a missed call from the previous night. It was from my close friend, fellow poet, and “brother.” He had been by my side in many of the stories that I documented for this project. He, like me, found “salvation” in the sacred spaces created by spoken word. He is now an English professor, and the first and acting Poet Laureate of Hartford, Connecticut. (Full circle)

At 3:00 am PST, I called him back. Because he awakes at 5:30 am EST, I knew he would be up. He laughed when he heard my gruff voice and commiserated about the doctoral rite of passage of surviving being immersed 20,000 leagues under the “Great Write Sea”. I poured a

²⁸² See Appendix G for a link to the poem, *What if This is God’s Work*, by Talaam Acey.

new cup of coffee and laughed at myself for pulling an all-nighter. Channeling my inner Danny Glover in *Lethal Weapon*, I said, “I’m getting too old for this...”

We reflected on how spoken word was so much more than filling our Moleskine notebooks with our thoughts and constructing clever wordplay to “spit” at the local poetry spot. We spoke on how performing was a spiritually infused act of claiming our truths and proclaiming our truths. We spoke about “salvation” and how our relationship with God was enhanced by being a part of that nascent community that gathered around an Oak tree in that downtown Hartford park.

The conversation was brief, but long enough for us to remember, deeply. He told me he was proud of me. I told him he was my inspiration. “Spoken word makes siblings out of strangers.” I was sure to tell my brother that I loved him before hanging up.

3:19 am PST:

I returned to my desk, and begin typing the words you just read...

Opportunities for Further Research

When I first began this project, most of the poets that exhibited the qualities relevant for this study were women. Even as I reflect on Baby Suggs in *Beloved*, I notice that though she sometimes spoke in traditional churches, she did not have the access to pastor a church according to the discriminatory practices that were prevalent in the mid to late 1800’s. In many ways, women are still experiencing similar barriers, both explicit and implicit, in being able to exercise the fullness of their spiritual leadership in traditional religious settings.

In the same way “The Clearing” was a necessary creation, in part as a response to the discrimination faced by women, I am intrigued if there are similar socio-political and theological factors that lead women poets to find more freedom to express their spiritual leadership in “third spaces” like spoken word gatherings. Is this a form of resistance to the male-dominated sites of traditional religious institutions or is it that the spaces of practicing spoken word communities naturally create conditions for a type of leadership that allows women to thrive in new ways. Though I hinted to this in the paper, I wonder what I can learn by investigating this phenomenon through historical lens of Black folk religion and the theoretical concepts that inform this paper.

Next Steps:

It was my strategy to use the method of autoethnography for the purpose of becoming an expert on my own story. I also wanted to create an intellectual infrastructure to understand how spoken word expresses the hybridity of Black folk religious traditions. Now that I have been able to apply multiple theoretical frameworks to my own story, I hope to engage in traditional qualitative methods like surveys and interviews to compare and analyze the experience of others who have inhabited similar spoken word spaces, and whether it addressed the problem identified at the genesis of this paper.

Beyond my intention to publish in academic journals and present my findings in relevant academic settings, I plan on writing a curriculum to teach this topic in both undergraduate and graduate levels, including seminaries. I also envision opportunities to engage churches and religious institutions about this phenomenon through workshops, lectures, and other effective forums.

Lastly, I plan on partnering with filmmakers and others in new media to produce a short film. I imagine this film/videos will document the practices of spoken word communities through the lens of a Black folk religious traditions and capture the thoughts of both the artist and audience in how they experience the ritual performance of imaginative theologies. Ideally, this media project would feature the art and performances of someone like Sunni Patterson and would include commentaries from historians, religious practitioners, theologians, and artists.²⁸³

Conclusion

The purpose of this autoethnographic journey was to articulate, analyze, and understand my experiences within practicing spoken word communities. It was also undertaken because these creative gathering spaces, centered around poetry, generated much more than mere entertainment. They were and remain sites of personal and communal transformation. In a time when religious institutions are increasingly held in suspicion, perceived unwelcoming to diverse thought, and unable to fully respond to the challenges facing Black communities today, spoken word communities offer spiritual resources that are grounded in the rich legacy of Black folk religious traditions.

The healing and transformation demonstrated by the ritual performances of imaginative theologies, whether at The Nuyorican Poet's Café, Cofi's Brownstone, or at the Red Bay Coffee Public Roastery, bears witness to the transcendent activity of Spirit in the same way my Auntie testified of a God who "makes ways out of no ways." Through the memory of her pious hum, I am reminded of a "wonder-working power" that can be accessed in spaces beyond the traditional

²⁸³ See Fig G.1 in Appendix G for picture.

church; a memory that affirms in me a deep knowing that in the care of Black lives, today's spoken word communal practices offer something that somehow "just works."

It is only fitting that the final "house" featured the poet, Sunni Patterson. It was the comparison between her performance in New Orleans, and Morrison's, Baby Suggs, in "The Clearing" that first instigated the epiphany that initiated this inquiry. This initial intrigue turned into a project that allowed me to reflect on how I experienced, participated in, and contributed to Black folk religious traditions by practicing in a bricolage community of belonging that "seized sacred domains" in unlikely places. Spoken word not only re-connected me to my vocational call, but it equipped me with tools of resilience to face the complexity of today's challenges.

I encountered the waters of "something sacred" that emerged from the "deep like rivers" traditions that I discerned in open mic spots from Hartford, CT to Oakland, CA. At the same time, this "something sacred" not only immersed me onto a new poetic path, it enable me to remember a deeper baptism that connected me to the legacy of sitting with my Auntie in the pew during testimony time in the southern Maryland; a place that I learned from a place now shut-up in my bones that "We come from testifying folk!"

For this revelation that I carry with me, and so much more, I am forever grateful.

Appendix A



Fig. A.1 Baby Suggs in “The Clearing” and Sunni Patterson in New Orleans.

“The Clearing Scene” in Movie “Beloved”: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=om4c8bALiec>

Poem, “We Know this Place” by Sunni Patterson:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fBY0i5DMItA>



Fig. A.2 Mahsea performing in Oakland, CA, 2006.

Poem, “A Testimony” by Mahsea Evans:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WpAYtbCEwW4>

Appendix B



Fig. B.1 The Connecticut River as seen by the Great River Park in East Hartford, CT.

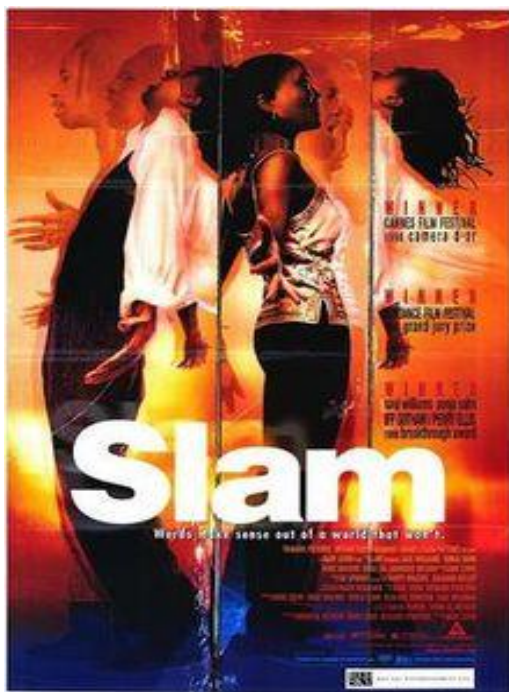


Fig B.2 Movie Poster for *Slam*.



Fig B.3 Preserved score sheet from first slam performance (Peter-56.3).

Poem, “*Sha Clack Clack*” by Saul Williams in movie *Slam*: <https://youtu.be/ojDKI8JxfLs>

Appendix C



Fig C.1. Bushnell Park in Downtown Hartford including the Oak Tree that the spoken word community gathered around in performance.



Fig C.2 “Mate Masie”-The Adinkra Symbol from Ghana that represents Wisdom, Discernment, and Understanding. The name “Mahsea” is derived from this symbol.



Fig. C.3.

Fig. C.3 Downtown Hartford at night.

Fig. C.4 The site of the Junxion at Signatures Café on Union Place Plaza across the street from Union Station.

Fig. C.5 Daughter wearing the same T-shirt and necklace that Mahsea wore during his first feature.



Fig. C.4.



Fig. C.5.



Fig C.6

Fig C.6

T-shirt
from the
Junxion.

Appendix D



Fig. D.1 (Left) Coopers United Methodist Church in Calvert County, MD.

Fig. D.2 (Right) The Nuyorican Poets Café in the Lower East Side, New York, NY.



Fig. D.3 The stage at the Nuyorican Poet's Café including its distinctive brick wall.

Poem, “Star Spangled Banner” by Faraji Salim:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7PYIGW7R3Ho>

Appendix E

Fig. E.1 (Bottom left) Cofi's "Brownstone" on Hungerford Street in Downtown Hartford, CT.

Fig E.2 (Bottom right) A group of Hartford Poets circa 2001.



Appendix F.

Fig F.1-4 Sunni Patterson's performance at the Red Bay Coffee Public Roastery: Oakland, CA, September 2019.



Poem, *“Untitled”* by Sunni Patterson: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=912HOULrIJY>

Poem, *“We Have Not Always Found Comfort in Killers”* by Sunni Patterson:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1bF3TkFPBjQ>

Poem, *“My Mama House is a River”* by Sunni Patterson:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NWb_xuVD_w8

Appendix G



Fig. G.1 (Above left) Mahsea with Sunni Patterson in Oakland, CA. 2019.

Fig G.2 (Above right) Mahsea performing with mother in the foreground. 2000.

Poem, “*What If This Is God’s Work*” by Talaam Acey:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XpLISENWX0c>

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